

The Angel of Ferrara

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Submitted for the degree of PhD

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Benjamin Woolley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'B' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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Date: 1st October, 2014

Abstract

This thesis comprises two parts: an extract of *The Angel of Ferrara*, a historical novel, and a critical component entitled *What is history doing in Fiction?*

The novel is set in Ferrara in February, 1579, an Italian city at the height of its powers but deep in debt. Amid the aristocratic pomp and popular festivities surrounding the duke's wedding to his third wife, the secret child of the city's most celebrated singer goes missing. A street-smart debt collector and lovelorn bureaucrat are drawn into her increasingly desperate attempts to find her son, their efforts uncovering the brutal instruments of ostentation and domination that gave rise to what we now know as the Renaissance.

In the critical component, I draw on the experience of writing *The Angel of Ferrara* and nonfiction works to explore the relationship between history and fiction. Beginning with a survey of the development of historical fiction since the inception of the genre's modern form with the Walter Scott's *Waverley*, I analyse the various paratextual interventions—prefaces, authors' notes, acknowledgements—authors have used to explore and explain the use of factual research in their works. I draw on this to reflect in more detail at how research shaped the writing of the *Angel of Ferrara* and other recent historical novels, in particular Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

I then examine the issue from the opposite perspective: the use of fictional devices in history, considering whether or not this compromises or enhances historical authority and validity.

I end by critically examining the prevailing notion that the borderline between fiction and history has become blurred, arguing that, while each influences the other, the distinction is one of type rather than degree.

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The Angel of Ferrara - a Novel

Of all the places I have seen in Italy, Ferrara is the one by far I should most covet to live in. It is the ideal of an Italian city, once great, now a shadow of itself.

William Hazlitt, 1824*

* Hazlitt, W, *Notes of a journey through France and Italy* (1826), p343

DAY ONE

Wednesday, 28th February, 1579

She waits.

She waits as she has been waiting for eight days.

Eight days ago, Angelo sat just there, in that chair, sunshine coming through the gauze curtain, warming the wood of the table, as she stood behind him, looking at his reflection in the glass, delving the thicket of his unruly hair, insisting that she must trim or at least comb it.

‘Mother: your hair’s always a mess,’ he had said, batting her hand away. ‘I am not going to trust you with mine.’

They had seemed more comfortable in each other’s company that day than in months. There was no hint of trouble.

And then he disappeared, vanished. He had left, heading off for choir practice, and no one has seen him since.

So she waits, trapped in her own home when she should be out there looking for him.

The fire in the grate is nearly cold, little more than a nest of ash. The tallow candle has burned down to its holder. Hope is burning out.

Tarquinia picks up the beaker and takes another sip. The congealed syrup of poppy is thick and oily, cloying in her throat.

She goes to the window and peers out. The houses opposite are dark. The bell tolls. Night is falling. Where is Elizabetta? She said she would come. She is playing a game. She is lurking out there somewhere, surely, making Tarquinia wait.

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The latch of the front door lifts. The noise brings Tarquinia sharply back to the moment. She faces the door, smoothing her dress.

Elizabetta totters in on chopines with heels as thick as three finger-widths. Her cloak is long enough to trip on, and she is wearing a ridiculous veil, a disguise that she surely knew would only draw attention to herself. She closes the door and looks at Tarquinia across the room. With her tiny, child-like fingers, she tries to pull up the veil, but a thread catches one of the clasps holding the tight braids in her bleached hair. Tarquinia has to go over to untangle the fabric.

The girl's face is pale as paper. She trembles as she looks at Tarquinia.

'What did he say?' Tarquinia asks.

The girl staggers over to the chair facing Tarquinia's, and lowers herself into it like an old woman. She has spotted the cup on the table and reaches for it, but Tarquinia snatches it away.

'Please,' the girl says, still trembling. 'I need some.'

'First tell me what the podestá said.'

'Donna Molza, I beg of you—I need something, to steady me. Then I will tell you.'

She can bargain, this one, even while she pretends to be in the throes of distress.

Tarquinia walks over to her and cradles the back of her head. She puts the beaker to the girl's lips. Elizabetta sucks the liquid noisily.

Putting the cup out of reach on the mantelpiece, Tarquinia moves her chair closer to Elizabetta and sits down, so their knees touch. She takes Elizabetta's hands, which are freezing cold.

'What did the podestá say?' Tarquinia asks, in a gentle voice, as she strokes Elizabetta's fingers.

Elizabetta looks around the room as she licks her lips. Her breathing becomes more regular, but her eyes maintain an agitated flicker.

'Elizabetta?'

'I can't...' The girl's lips tighten. Her nose reddens. She trembles.

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Tarquinia can barely breathe. 'Elizabetta, what is it?'

'He...he touched me,' she says, her voice rising to a squeak. She pulls a hand free from Tarquinia's grasp and touches her nose.

'What?'

'He touched me.'

'The podestà?'

She nods, slurping a sob. 'Keeper of the duke's peace, meant to protect us, isn't he? I go to him, like you asked, a married woman, a respectable married woman, and he gropes me.'

Tarquinia grabs the girl's arms and shakes her. 'But you did ask him, didn't you? The podestà—you did ask him about Angelo? Why he's not doing anything to find him?'

Elizabetta's eyes widen in amazement.

'Donna Molza! Did you not hear me? He grabbed me. Here.' She thrusts a hand into the lap of her dress, between her legs. 'Would he do that to you? The duke's famous singer? Would he?'

The girl is playacting. Going to a man known to be free with his hands dressed like that, with her bosom spilling out of the top of her bodice, what did Elizabetta expect?

'He is a dreadful man, I know—an oaf,' Tarquinia says.

'A brute. Like I was some...whore.' Elizabetta shifts her shoulders and lifts her chin to show her indignation.

'Please,' Tarquinia implores. 'What did he say about Angelo?'

The girl's eyes now fix on Tarquinia.

'Nothing,' she announces.

Tarquinia leans away. 'Nothing?'

Elizabetta shrugs. 'He can't do anything, he says, due to the duke's wedding.'

'The wedding?' Tarquinia asks. 'What has that got to do with Angelo?'

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‘City’s full of foreigners, parades, receptions, jousts—sending the guard to look for him while all that was going on - .’

‘But it has been over a week!’

‘After the blessing.’ Her manner has become almost prim, as though she is responsible for managing the podestá’s appointments. ‘Then he says he might do something.’

Tarquinia is speechless.

‘Several others have gone missing, you know,’ Elizabetta adds.

‘What?’

‘It’s not just Angelo. There are others, several of them—street boys.’

‘Angelo isn’t a street boy—he’s a member of the cathedral choir!’

Elizabetta leans forward. ‘A monster roams the streets, they say. They call him...’ She pauses, her eyes widening a little. ‘...the Golem.’ She leans back, as though to see what evil magic the word will work on Tarquinia. ‘He picks them for the Jews—this thing they like to do with Christian children, with their blood, during their rites.’

‘Who says? The podestá? He thinks Angelo was snatched by this...this Golem?’

Another shrug. Tarquinia’s temper is beginning to slip. ‘Don’t you care about him?’ she asks.

Elizabetta lets out a dry laugh. ‘What, like you, Donna Molza?’ The girl’s wicked eyes gleam. ‘It was you abandoned him—dumped him, your own son, on me.’

She smiles, and gets to her feet. She shuffles over to the mantelpiece. Even in her high heels she is too short to reach the beaker.

‘I want some more,’ she demands.

‘The cup is empty.’

Elizabetta drags a chair over to the mantelpiece, the legs scraping noisily across the floorboards. She climbs on to the seat, but is so unsteady she could tip into the fireplace.

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‘Stop!’ Tarquinia shouts at her. ‘I will get it.’

Tarquinia fetches the cup and gives it to her. Elizabetta puts a finger into the bowl to wipe up the dregs. She licks her nail like a sweetmeat, inspecting it from every side to ensure she has sucked off all the syrup. Had she been drinking before she arrived, before seeing the podestá? There is a thick, sweet smell of rotting fruit about her.

She swivels round on a heel, and sees the papers on the desktop. She puts down the cup and plucks up one of the horoscopes.

‘I want one of these,’ she says. ‘I want you to do one of these for me.’ She peers at it, wondering at the symbols. ‘A nativity—isn’t that what you call it?’

Tarquinia snatches it from between her fingers.

‘Elizabetta - ’

But the girl casually picks up another sheet and peers at the figures, her brow—plucked so high it almost reaches her crown—furrowed with curiosity. ‘I want to know why the stars are so kind to Donna Tarquinia Molza, and so cruel to me. I want to know why God would give you the voice and face of an angel. Why you can go around without bothering to paint your cheeks or powder or plat your hair, in flat shoes and a dark, plain dress buttoned to the throat while I -’

‘Please Elizabetta... Sit.’

‘Why you,’ she continues, slapping down the paper and turning to Tarquinia, ‘can flounce your talents in front of the duke’s men and everyone treats you like a goddess, while I get groped.’ She moves closer. ‘Why He would let you have a son, but not me.’

The arm suddenly swings, but the syrup has slowed her movements, and Tarquinia manages to catch her wrist. It quivers in her grip. Then her body suddenly loosens, and she collapses forward into Tarquinia’s chest. She starts to sob as Tarquinia hooks her arms beneath Elizabetta’s, struggling to keep her from dropping to the floor.

‘Come on.’ Tarquinia coaxes her back to the chair. Elizabetta drops into it, her skirts billowing. Tarquinia kneels before her.

‘Elizabetta. Listen. I know it is hard. You and Emilio have been like mother and father to Angelo.’

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‘But I am not his mother, am I?’ A fat tear runs down Elizabetta’s cheeks, smearing the paint. ‘Not a mother, with her own children.’ She shakes her head pathetically, and wipes her nose with her hand. ‘Emilio will not even sleep in our bed.’ She looks down at her lap, scrunching the material of her dress with her hands.

Tarquinia lifts her chin.

‘Elizabetta, this is what we will do,’ she tells the whimpering girl, offering her a handkerchief. Elizabetta takes it and wipes her nose. ‘Tomorrow morning a reception is to be held in the main piazza. I want you to go to the cathedral steps.’

Elizabetta blinks and sniffs. ‘What?’

‘I want you to go to the cathedral steps and make an exhibition. You will scream out about Angelo, about him going missing, about nobody caring or doing anything, scream as loudly as you can, so all the guests hear, so the whole city hears, everyone.’

Elizabetta’s eyes widen as she realises what is being asked of her. Then she puckers her nose with disgust.

‘In public? Like some common harlot?’

‘Like a concerned mother, which to the world is what you are, and what I really believe you to be. A mother who cares about the boy she has devoted so much time and care bringing up.’

Elizabetta shakes her head.

‘Elizabetta, remember: if Angelo is not... If he should not return.’ Tarquinia pauses to collect herself. ‘If he should not return, I will no longer be in a position to keep you.’

‘What?’

‘Your allowance. I would no longer be able to pay it.’

‘You would cut me off?’

‘Of course I would.’

The look of disgust becomes one of shock.

‘You can do this for him, for Angelo,’ Tarquinia urges. ‘You can. You can help save him.’

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Before Elizabetta has a chance to refuse, Tarquinia gets to her feet, takes the beaker from the mantelpiece and goes into the pantry. She rinses out the cup and fetches the mortar and pestle to mix a restorative. The gentle, regular action of grinding and mixing the ingredients calms her nerves. She strains the liquid and tastes it.

A clatter comes from the front room, and she returns to find Elizabetta has taken the lid off the chest under the window and is pawing through Tarquinia's old dresses. She lifts one out and holds it up, stroking the fabric with her thumb. The blue velvet is embroidered with delicate flowers around the neckline, hems and cuffs—a dress from before Tarquinia's widowhood.

The girl presses it against her body to see what it might look like on her.

'Why don't you wear these any more?' she asks.

'Do you like it?' Tarquinia says.

Elizabetta nods.

'Then you shall have it—I will take up the hem and the sleeves. Now, come and sit down.' Tarquinia holds out the beaker, as a lure.

Bringing the dress with her, Elizabetta obediently sits, draping her prize across her knees. 'To give you strength,' Tarquinia tells her. The girl drinks the tonic, blinking at Tarquinia over the rim as she gulps it down.

Tarquinia takes the emptied cup and positions herself at Elizabetta's feet.

'Thank you,' Elizabetta says, pathetically.

'You will do this for me,' Tarquinia says, stroking the girl's cheek.

'I will,' Elizabetta whispers, the movement of her lower lip making dimples in her plump cheeks. 'For you, Donna Molza, I will do it.'

'You have done so much,' Tarquinia says. 'And I know you can do it.'

Elizabetta nods. 'I will put on a show, Donna Molza, just like you. I will go and sing my heart out for Angelo, and fill the piazza with noise.'

DAY TWO

Thursday, 1st March, 1579

The sound bounces around the dark vaults of the cathedral's nave—a squeal.

'Hear that?' Filippo Fiorini asks, raising a finger.

'Hear what, fattore?'

'A cry,' Filippo says. 'A cry of some sort.'

The deacon feigns interest, standing almost in a mockery of attentiveness as they both listen.

'Probably nothing,' the deacon says, with a wave of the hand. 'We should proceed.'

'I heard something.'

'Bird in the rafters, fattore,' the deacon insists. 'We get them, thanks to the state of the roof. Now fattore, I am waited on by the duke's chamberlain at a reception, a breakfast to welcome the wedding guests from Mantua. The Papal nuncio is there. He must not be kept waiting, as I am sure you realise.'

'Just a few more matters, decano.'

'Surely, fattore, we have exhausted our transaction?'

Exhausted? The fattore has barely exhaled.

'The cathedral choir sings in the cardinal's name, decano. What its members wear at the ceremony to bless the marriage of his brother the duke is of no small importance, would you not agree?' Filippo asks.

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‘But there is time, fattore, plenty of it. Don Luigi is still in his residence in Rome, is he not, or Tivoli? Indeed, not due here until next Friday.’

‘Thursday, decano. The cardinal arrives next Thursday.’

‘Whatever, the principle matters are settled, the remaining details can be dealt with tomorrow, or the next day.’

‘So, what is it we agreed?’ Filippo asks, sharply. ‘The cardinal’s subsidy, for the new surplices?’

The question takes the deacon by surprise. Filippo is often mistaken for a common clerk. His superiors forget he is responsible for the cardinal’s monetary affairs, for dealing with his eminence’s contracts and accounts in Ferrara, with his palace in the city, with his properties and rents, salaries and pensions, every tittle of expenditure and every jot of contractual negotiation.

‘Forty lire?’ the deacon guesses.

Filippo awaits the correct answer, but hears that noise again. High pitched, a human noise, surely, coming from somewhere deep in the darkness of the nave.

The decano mentions another figure.

‘I thought...’ Filippo shakes his head, as though the noise might be cast from his ears. ‘It must be the excitement of the occasion, decano. Sorry. You said?’

‘Thirty five?’

Is he trying to trick the cardinal’s factor? Filippo sighs. ‘Thirty lire marchesana, ten soldi, decano.’

‘Really? That little?’

‘For the outfitting of all voices in the choir with vestments embroidered with the device agreed upon, intertwining the arms of the Este family of his highness the duke and our lord the cardinal with those of the duke’s new bride. That is what his eminence’s household is paying for, and that is what I expect to see on the chests of all the choristers at the ceremony of blessing.’

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The deacon nods in weary acceptance. Filippo removes his purse and counts out the coins.

The business concluded, the mood lifts a little.

‘These are exciting times, are they not, decano?’ Filippo ties the purse back onto his belt. ‘Imagine, the cardinal with us again after so many months in Rome, sitting there upon his throne - ’

But the deacon has neither the time or appetite to imagine anything beyond his breakfast. ‘I will fetch your cloak,’ he says curtly, pocketing the money and walking across the sacristy to the far door, the soles of his loose slippers slapping angrily on the marble floor.

So Filippo is left to imagine for himself. He gazes through the wooden screen to the far side of the choir stalls, where his eminence will be Sunday week, God willing, sat on his throne, the long sleeves of his vestments cascading over the arms, his small feet resting upon a cushion of red silk, a stray fringe of hair as soft as the bristles of a fine paintbrush escaping the headband of his galero, as it always does. Those two brown eyes will be peering with their usual intense, almost childish curiosity through the tassels that dangle from the hat’s wide brim, and may even for a moment come to rest on his faithful factor. The thought of a man of such gentle wisdom and quiet nobility, burdened with the fortunes of so much and so many—that such a man would invest so much trust in Filippo brings a stinging sensation to the nose.

Thirty lire, ten soldi, your eminence, equivalent to half of one scudo! Fifty might reasonably have been demanded—more. And for that, the choir performing these new musical marvels promised by Maestro Eremita in the finest embroideries. An elegant demonstration—if your eminence will forgive a hint of pride—of the power of the economic arts, which, like the fine stitching in the undergarment of your eminence’s camicia, go unnoticed, yet keep everything together.

The deacon’s return chases Filippo’s fancy away. He briskly, even roughly helps Filippo on with his coat.

And there it is again, this time, distinct, and undeniable. The cry of a piglet, a cat, a child—no, a woman; definitely a woman. She is screaming some words, at first

indistinct, but beginning to resolve. 'My son! My son!' The shrieks echo through the vaults.

'Quick,' the deacon says. 'Some mad crone. We get them.' He tugs at Filippo's sleeve.

'Decano?'

The deacon nods in the direction of the chapel of St George. 'We can get out the back way.'

'But the noise is coming from the front—the front of our cathedral church. We cannot ignore it.'

The deacon's look makes it clear he thinks he can.

The noise intensifies, the screams becoming more shrill. Filippo is compelled to race down the nave towards the main entrance. He opens the small hatch in one of the great doors. The bright morning sunshine is blinding, and he has to shade his eyes to see the woman sprawled across the wide steps leading down to the piazza. She is howling in despair, throwing her body into horrible convulsions.

'My son! My son! Angelo! Angelo!'

The din has drawn a crowd, which fans around the steps like the audience at a masque: merchants and shoppers from the cloth market, butchers from the beccaria in their bloody aprons, actors on a stage—worse, courtiers, dignitaries and wedding guests gathering for the breakfast reception by the pavilion, Tuscans, Neapolitans, Venetians, Germans, French, the Papal nuncio himself! Everyone, the whole world, watching this dreadful, shameful spectacle taking place on the steps of the cardinal's cathedral.

'Madama,' Filippo shouts. 'Madama!' But she ignores him, and nearly slaps him across the cheek with a flailing arm. 'Shush, shush, please! Control yourself!' How does one calm a woman in the throes of such a frenzy?

Then, she is suddenly quiet, as though she can control this mania, close it like a sluice.

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‘Madama?’ Filippo is perplexed. Does she smile at him? Women are hard to calculate—much harder than money. Her gaze shifts. A fury flushes onto her cheeks. She is looking over Filippo’s shoulder. He turns to see she is looking at the deacon, who stands framed by the hatch, peering out, frozen as solid as the sculpture of Atlas next to him. She thrusts a finger across Filippo’s shoulder.

‘Him!’ she snarls. ‘He did not protect my son! No one did. They let them take him!’ Her voice has become a sinister growl.

Filippo looks to see the deacon is confounded by the accusation.

‘What do you mean?’ Filippo asks the crazed harpy.

The focus of her pale brown eyes tightens on Filippo, as her tiny hands, her sharp little nails grip his cloak. He recognises her, but cannot yet quite place her.

‘In the choir, my boy is a chorister in the cathedral choir.’

‘Who?’

‘Nine days ago, vanished! After rehearsal, gone!’ Her enunciation has become a venomous hiss. The crowd has fallen silent, no doubt straining to overhear the conversation. ‘Never came home. And no one will help me, signore. No one will hear me!’ Her lips quiver as she stares at him, her eyes as shiny and impenetrable as polished marble, and, even in these histrionic circumstances, it is hard not to notice how pretty she is, her face round with full cheeks. ‘Not the podestá, not the deacon, not you!’ Her voice is rising again. ‘Son of a poor mason and his wife—they abandon him to the wolves!’

Now he recognises her.

‘Emilio Rossi? You mean his boy—Angelo?’

‘My poor husband dressed the stone at the cardinal’s palace, and you have abandoned him, and abandoned me, his wife,’ she growls.

‘Madama, I had no idea - ’

Then, like Lot’s wife, she seems to freeze, staring at him.

‘Madama?’

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An absolute stillness has descended across the piazza, across a vast expanse of space. The only movement is the fluttering of jousting pennants in a light breeze.

Then, without warning, as though their intercourse had never taken place, she opens her mouth, and continues her screeching lament. 'He has been taken, stolen from me, and no one will do anything to save him. No one.'

A man approaches, dressed in a velvet doublet with slashed sleeves. He leans forward, his forearm on his knee, like a gallant in a play. She looks at him, and smiles. 'Madama,' he says, 'do you need help?'

'Oh, signore!' she pleads, grabbing his hand.

'No, thank you, signore,' Filippo says, holding up a hand to him. 'I will deal with this.'

She resumes her wailing, the noise so intense, the man retreats back down the steps.

'The podestá, madama!' Filippo shouts at her over the din. 'It is his job to protect us.' He dares to shake her shoulder to get her attention. 'I shall send for him.'

Her control is once again miraculously restored, as though he is dealing with two women in one body. This one looks at him, a half-smile of disbelief on her face. 'That lazy drunk?' she says. 'That fornicating oaf?'

'Madama, shush!'

She is addressing the crowd again. 'I am shunned! To flatter the duke's foreign visitors, for the sake of the city's reputation, the podestá has sacrificed my child!' Her small nose, wrinkled with contempt, is thrust towards Filippo. 'As would you.' She jabs a finger painfully into his shoulder. She is on her feet. 'As would you!' she yells at the deacon, who retreats back into the cathedral. She turns to the crowd and flings out her arms. 'As would they all!'

§

Filippo watches the desolate face of Angelo's father, colourless as the dusk. An afternoon has been spent looking for Emilio Rossi's missing boy, scouring the route Angelo would have taken when he left the cathedral after rehearsal, from the door of

the cloister used by the choristers to the San Giorgio Gate, across the bridge, along the towpath, past the ferryman's cottage, to the mason's home in the Borgo Misericordia. A wide swathe along the side of the river has been searched, down to the water and up to the fields. All the sluices and irrigation channels, shrubbery and coppicewood, outhouses and barns have been raked. Dismissing Filippo's scruples, the cardinal's reckless bailiff had even broken into several vacant properties, taking, as always, an unsettling relish in the forceful exercise of his eminence's authority. And, for these efforts, all they had found was the carcass of a dog and a hedge whore entertaining a client.

'It is good,' Filippo insists to Emilio, waving towards the river and the flat fields disappearing into a thin mist that smudges the horizon. 'Not finding Angelo is good.' The mason stares forlornly at the sluggish waters.

'Fattore, someone took him.' His voice, like his posture, is crumbling. 'I should have gone and fetched him from the cathedral. All that talk of boys being taken. But I was stuck in the yard. What have I done? What will she say?'

'Your wife?'

'His mother.' His eyes are dilated with despair. All afternoon, Emilio has maintained a stoic composure, methodically and diligently helping to search the route they had agreed Angelo must have taken. Now the composure disintegrates, like a roof collapsing into a building. With a series of loud sobs and splutters, he keels forward and drops to his knees on the damp grass of the verge.

Filippo goes over to him and lays a hand on his heaving back. He is uncomfortable dealing with such intense feelings, particularly in a man usually so reticent, a man who is usually as solid as the stones he has dressed for the cardinal's buildings.

'Maybe the river took him,' the bailiff speculates, unhelpfully.

'That dribble?' Filippo shouts, turning on him, gesturing towards the channel, a narrow sash of water the colour of pewter that snakes away from the bridge, between wide and muddy banks. 'Our river barely moves. Further up, you can ford it without troubling your knees, thanks to the failure of his highness the duke's chamberlain to finance the dredging of the channel...' The bailiff is almost as surprised as Filippo at this

sudden outburst of temper. 'He has just...disappeared,' Filippo says, more moderately, 'of his own accord. Boys do. For the adventure.'

'How would you know?' someone else says. A restive mood has spread through the volunteers.

'You go home, Emilio,' Filippo urges Rossi, recovering his composure. 'The light is going and the mist will rise. We will have another look in the morning, and further afield, I promise. His eminence's tenants and servants in the territories and liberties have been told to be on the look-out. The roads, the ferries, all avenues of escape are being searched. Our eyes are everywhere.' The exaggeration is only slight. 'Tomorrow I can send an agent to Quartexana. He has probably gone there, your boy. It is just a few hours' walk away, where all the street boys and apprentices go when they want to escape—not that...'

This is not helping.

'It is best you go home,' he tells Emilio, 'so you are there if your son returns. I can send one of my men home with you if you want.'

The mason shakes his head and shuffles off like an imbecilic old man.

Relief. If Filippo can get back quickly to the palazzo, there may be time catch up with preparations for the cardinal's arrival. But as he is about to head back across the bridge, Filippo spots a figure approaching from the gate, dark against the looming city walls.

'Fattore!' The voice blasts a hole through the cold, evening air.

His massive chest and stomach bulging out like a ship's sail filled with wind, Brancaccio strides swiftly towards the exhausted party.

'The singer,' someone whispers.

Filippo's heart drops.

'Who said that?' the singer says in a low, resonant growl. No one replies. Feet shift. Brancaccio selects an unfortunate who happens to be close by, and confronts him. 'If the great warrior Hercules had essayed a motet would you call him a singer? If Alexander had performed a madrigal?' The victim, looking down at the ground, shakes

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his head. Brancaccio turns to address the crowd. 'For the past twenty years I have served his highness our Duke Alfonso, served him and Ferrara faithfully as a cavaliere, as a gentleman of the duke's wardrobe, as a captain of his guard. I have jousting, I have hunted, I have - '

'Signor Brancaccio,' Filippo interrupts.

'Yes, fattore?' Brancaccio smiles, any hint of anger having disappeared as quickly as it erupted.

Filippo looks at him, unsure what to say next.

Brancaccio comes closer. 'Yes. Of course. The matter of the moment.' He thumps a hand on Filippo's shoulder and nods at him. His beard is so thick, black and tightly curled it looks like a hive of bees has swarmed on his chin. 'I heard the commotion earlier and thought I should offer my assistance. It is good to see a man as capable as you engaged as a principal in this enterprise.'

'Enterprise?'

'You are searching for the boy, are you not? This chorister Angelo Rossi? I have been making enquiries, and the intelligencers tell me he went missing while returning from choir practice.'

'Intelligencers, signore? I do not think - '

Brancaccio holds up a hand to silence Filippo. 'A singer has been lost,' he announces. He presses his right hand to his chest, and nods solemnly. 'Though, as I say, a gentleman and a warrior first, I too, as our friend here has pointed out...' He nods towards the bystander earlier selected. '...sing.'

'But I am not sure there is much more we can do, signore.' Filippo struggles to moderate his voice, his tenuous grip of affairs slipping. 'The darkness.' He gestures over the side of the bridge, to the greyness beyond, the sky shading into the colour of ink.

'Nonsense man, I have a plan. Ah...'

The Angel of Ferrara

He sees Rossi, drawn back by the clamour of the singer's voice. 'This the poor boy's father?' Brancaccio knocks Filippo lightly on the chest with the back of his hand. 'This him?'

Brancaccio considers Rossi for a moment. To Filippo's utter bemusement, it turns out this is a prelude to tears, real tears, soaking into the singer's beard. Brancaccio steps forward and embraces the mason firmly. Rossi becomes limp in the great man's arms.

'Your pain is mine,' Brancaccio says, in a hoarse whisper nevertheless audible to all around, and probably as far as the castello. 'Give it to me, this agony you suffer. Let me take it from you!'

Rossi's body now trembles, as the misery resurfaces and pours out onto Brancaccio's shoulder.

'We believe Angelo to be alive,' Filippo says, irritated at the singer's slick resort to sentiment.

Brancaccio grasps Rossi's shoulders, and gently pushes him away to an arm's length so he can look him in the eye.

'Listen to his eminence's *fattore*,' he urges. 'He is right! As our great poet Ariosto has written: "Oh! how from on high shall true Hope false Fear/Depose withal, and to the bottom bear!" True Hope! And so, you have an article of the boy's clothing?'

Rossi, sniffing, seems not to have heard. Brancaccio turns to Filippo and smiles patiently, as though expecting Filippo to interpret the curious request, having assumed it to be part of the poem.

'Signore?' Filippo asks.

'His clothes, something the boy has worn, recently,' Brancaccio says, the smile maintained, a hand stirring the air in an effort to get someone to understand.

'At home,' Rossi says, as though a memory has been jogged. 'His shirt. He changed out of it, to wear his surplice, as he left for rehearsal.'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Perfect! Proceed as fast as you can, messer mason, and retrieve it! It will be rich with the boy’s odours. Fattore, one of yours here can escort the poor man. Get the shirt! And bring it to the Jews’ ghetto.’

‘What? Why?’ Filippo’s puzzlement becomes alarm.

‘Dogs!’ Brancaccio announces, proudly. ‘Two hunting mastiffs are being prepared. The scent will take them to the boy.’

‘No, I mean - ’ Filippo cannot restrain himself from touching Brancaccio’s sleeve. ‘Why the ghetto?’

‘You concerned about worrying your Jewish friends?’ Brancaccio asks. ‘Your lenders of money?’

‘He used to cut through the ghetto,’ Rossi points out, in a weak voice.

‘What?’ Filippo asks.

‘On his way back from the cathedral. We told him not to, but...’

‘There you are!’ the singer says triumphantly. ‘That is why the ghetto.’

§

Torches and dogs. Dealers from the clothmarket, who had been clearing their stalls for the night, are drawn towards the light and the barking around the bar of the ghetto nuovo. The foot of the cathedral bell tower is becoming crowded with people—young men, mostly, pouring in from the Borgo di Sotto and other barbarous regions of the city.

The hour has just rung. The day has almost disappeared.

The shadows of a courtier and his men, cast by the torches, leap around the marble of the bell tower. They have two huge, fierce, excited mastiffs on chains, which jump and bark like Cerberus at the mouth of hell.

Dogs are such horrible creatures—the smell, barking, teeth, howling, hackles; slack, slobbering lips like octopus flesh drooling slime onto the cobbles. The yearning to get away, to return to the enclosing wings of the cardinal’s Palazzo San Francesco intensifies. So much to do there. The fattore’s plans are disintegrating—months of

preparation for the cardinal's imminent residency destroyed in minutes by this rash 'enterprise'.

The crowd thickens. The dogs rear up as they tug at their chains. A reckless idiot scales the column of Nicolo III for a better view; if he falls, his head will surely splatter on the paving like an egg. Another group of men has arrived with more torches, dripping fiery pitch onto the ground. Some women are gathered near a corral of costermonger's barrows. Filippo notices a tall, elegant woman standing slightly apart from them. She has the bearing and quality of dress of a prostitute, yet does not wear a yellow mantilla on her head. She proffers a pair of shoes as though she wants to sell them, or perhaps as a holy relic.

The mood of the crowd is becoming wild and carnivalesque. Filippo wills the boy's father to return with this wretched shirt. Where is the podestà? Why has the duke's guard not been called? Are they oblivious to the streets becoming occupied by a mob?

And where is Brancaccio? He was standing at Filippo's side a few moments ago. He looks around for the singer, and sees that he is now leaning casually over the ghetto bar. He could be a farmer at his gate. He pays no heed to the hubbub he has helped create, staring down the Via Sabbioni as though at a crop for harvesting. The street of the Jews, in stark contrast to this side of the bar, is empty, dark save for a lamp in the portico of the synagogue.

Filippo can bear it no more. He walks round the back of the crowd, squeezes between two carts loaded with bales of cloth, and follows the marble pediment of the bell tower up to the bar, keeping as close to the wall as possible to skirt the dogs.

'Signore, I am concerned,' he says, when he reaches Brancaccio.

'About the poor boy? So am I. Between you and me, fattore, I fear we may be too late.'

'Too late?'

'They have already used him, for their blood rites.'

'Blood rites?'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘There was a boy taken by the Jews in the time of Duke Ercole, was there not? His body found mutilated near the walls?’

‘What?’

‘His privities cut off.’

‘No, I...I was talking of this gathering. It is becoming rather...exuberant.’

Brancaccio turns and, leaning back on the bar, looks at the crowd.

‘Yes,’ he agrees, ‘it is.’

‘I think it might be better to send for the podestà,’ Filippo suggests.

‘Do you?’ Brancaccio bristles his moustache and shakes his head with maddening nonchalance. ‘He will come by and by, when it suits him. But until he does, is it not up to us, the citizens, to act? And promptly, before we lose the scent?’ He looks up. ‘What if it rains?’

‘It has not rained for weeks.’

‘Precisely! We are due a deluge!’

Brancaccio’s enthusiasm is almost cloying.

‘Excellent!’ Brancaccio suddenly shouts, the ear-splitting exclamation making Filippo’s heart leap. The singer is looking across Filippo’s shoulder towards the Via di San Romana. Filippo turns to see Rossi walking up into the square. The mason hesitates for a moment, as he beholds the immensity of the crowd. The look in his eyes is terror and confusion.

‘Messer Rossi! Here!’ Brancaccio’s shouts, his stentorian voice overcoming the hubbub. Rossi seems frozen to the spot, overwhelmed by the horde.

Brancaccio pushes briskly towards him, and Filippo follows in his wake. ‘You have the shirt?’ Brancaccio asks. Rossi appears not to understand the question.

Brancaccio can see the man is holding a tight bundle, and gently takes it from him. He lifts it to his nose to inhale.

‘I can smell him,’ he says, with a disturbing hint of relish. ‘I can smell your boy Angelo!’

The Angel of Ferrara

Rossi is looking nervously at the dogs. 'Will they harm him, if they find him?' he asks Brancaccio.

'Those creatures?' Brancaccio says. 'Good Lord, no. Puppies!' He smiles reassuringly.

'Hunting dogs,' Filippo corrects.

No one is listening to Filippo. Brancaccio takes the shirt and waves the bundle at the courtier with the dogs.

'Cesare! We have it! We have our scent!'

Filippo now recognises Brancaccio's associate. It is Cesare Trotti, the scion of that noble line. His slight, delicate frame and almost foppish dress hide a formidable inner strength, now obvious in his ability to dominate the beasts he has brought with him. He reels them in and they look up adoringly at their master.

Brancaccio walks over and hands Signor Trotti shirt. The young courtier leans down and offers it to the dogs' wet noses.

'The bar,' Brancaccio shouts.

A member of Signor Trotti's party unlatches it, and pushes it open.

The dogs' chains are loosened, Signor Trotti restraining the creatures by their studded collars. Their barks have now become sinister howls. The hunt is on.

§

They plunge into the ghetto. Brancaccio, Trotti and his men run after them. Bolder members of the crowd follow, while Filippo remains by the post of the ghetto bar, Messer Rossi at his side.

Filippo turns and looks at the cathedral, then down the street.

'Do you think it likely Angelo would have walked down there, on his way to the San Giorgio Gate?' Filippo asks.

'He was supposed not to,' Rossi says. 'But...' He clenches his lips and shakes his head, as though the boy's disobedience was inevitable.

The Angel of Ferrara

They watch the cluster of torches, like the bunches of fiery flowers, throw light on the lower branches of a great cedar spread over the top of a long garden wall. Heads down, tails up, the dogs move from one side of the street to the other, now along the steps leading up to the synagogue entrance. One of the creatures cocks its leg and urinates against the pedestal of a column, prompting a cheer from the crowd. The other dog sniffs at the stain, and follows the example of the first. Filippo can see the damp patch on the stone, the shape of a shroud.

Then suddenly the dogs are off, cantering further up the street, disappearing into the dark as the torch bearers struggle to keep up. Rossi chooses this moment to enter the ghetto, wandering up the street almost aimlessly, like a soldier from the battlefield.

Filippo could now just slip back to the palazzo, continue with his affairs. Who would notice? Who would care? Is this any longer his concern? The mason is not a member of the household, and though the child is in his eminence's choir, he is not on the palazzo's books. He turns to look at the main square, now dark and quiet. The lantern in the archway leading to the duke's palace is the only point of light, and its glow catches the serene drapes of the pavilion erected for the wedding joust—a picture of well-regulated, well-managed orderliness.

A sudden outburst of barking drags Filippo's attention back to the ghetto. The dogs are now at the door of a house further up the street, their tails waving like reeds in a breeze, as they howl at the door. Filippo realises to his horror it is the home of Messer Mendes.

Both dogs then run off. Some men run off after them, while Signor Trotti walks up to Mendes's door. He starts to pound the polished panels with his fist.

A chant goes up among members of Trotti's party, calling to Mendes to come out, their voices laced with sham friendliness. Filippo has no choice but to run to where the rabble has gathered. By the time he gets there, one of Trotti's men is using a sledgehammer to pummel the door.

'Stop!' Filippo shouts. He feels his throat tightening, as though his Adam's apple has caught on a piece of bone. 'Please.' He has to stop to cough. He tries to settle

himself. 'Please,' he repeats, in a gentler but clearer voice. 'Messer Mendes is not deserving of this. He is one of our most eminent and honourable bankers; a respectable man.'

'He's a leech,' someone shrieks.

Filippo turns in fury.

'A respectable man. A supporter of his highness's court.'

'Fattore,' Signor Trotti says, calmly, 'you should be back at his eminence's palace, no? This is not your affair.'

'Is it yours?' Filippo says, his cheeks stinging at his own impertinence.

Signore gestures to his men to remove him.

'No!' Filippo shouts, his arms outstretched, his hands gripping the doorframe. 'This is not right!'

'This is not right!' Signor Trotti repeats, giving his voice a whining, nasal inflection. It takes the outburst of laughter from his acolytes to make Filippo aware he is being mimicked. 'You are more concerned about disturbing your lines of credit than saving the life of a Christian child of a Christian parent,' Signor Trotti declares in his normal voice, pointing at Rossi, who is being supported by two of Trotti's men, or perhaps restrained by them.

'The dogs - did they not run off?' Filippo points out, weakly, almost stifling his voice in his efforts to keep it low and prevent any breath from passing through his nose.

'Ah! You are a master of the hunt, are you fattore, as well as a scribbler of bills?'

Trotti awaits a response. Filippo has no strength to offer one.

'The barking is the signal my dogs are trained to give when they find the scent of their quarry,' he explains. 'They found it here.'

'The fattore is right.' Were the voice not so distinctive, Filippo would never have believed the intervention to be Brancaccio's. 'We should proceed carefully.' The singer is standing next to Signor Trotti, a restraining hand on the courtier's shoulder, the large man and the slender one making such an incongruous couple. 'Perhaps you, fattore,

might intercede with Messer Mendes since you know him? The scent has brought us to his doorstep. We just wish to ensure that the boy has not somehow...' Brancaccio waves his hand as he extemporises his words. '...Become lost in the Hebrew's property.' He smiles encouragingly.

Watched by the multitude, Filippo realises he has no option but to oblige the singer's apparently reasonable request. He has become the instrument of this escapade. He turns to face the door and pauses a moment, breathing deeply. He knocks lightly. 'Messer Mendes,' he calls through the coffered timber.

He presses an ear to a cold panel and listens.

He takes a step back. 'Messer Mendes?' he calls a little louder. 'It is Filippo Fiorini, factor to his eminence the cardinal. May I have a word? There is some...' He looks over his shoulder. The dogs are little more than an arm's length from him, their slobbering tongues lolling from their mouths, their tails wagging lazily.

'Get them,' Filippo says with revulsion, 'away.'

The dogs are pulled back. Brancaccio herds the crowd towards the opposite side of the street. The glare of the torches diminishes as they retreat. The air is momentarily still with anticipation as Filippo returns his ear to the door.

'Messer Mendes?' There is no response. 'He is not in,' Filippo concludes.

'There is a light,' Trotti points to one of the upper storey windows.

Filippo turns back to the door, and is about to knock again, when his cloak is grabbed from behind, and he is pulled away.

'Unhand me!' Filippo's voice is shrill as well as nasal with panic and indignation. The tightening of the collar strangles him, and he begins to choke. He staggers, and finds himself falling back, landing heavily on the cobbles.

As he struggles back to his feet, pain rising like hot nails through his buttocks, the man with the hammer is back at the door, and now sets about his task with renewed force. A few more blows shatter the sturdy panels, and the door's lock gives way. Filippo finds several men barging past him, nearly knocking him forward. He manages to recover his balance, but one of Signor Trotti's men shoulders him to the side. In a

spasm of outrage, Filippo shoves the man with more force than he thought himself capable, yelling, 'You touch the cardinal's plenipotentiary at your peril!'

The man unexpectedly gives way, and Filippo pushes into the throng now crowding the entrance hall of the Mendes house.

'Angelo!' a voice calls. 'Where's the boy?' asks another. Torches are moving around the hall and the stairs. Someone has gone into the kitchens, someone else rushes down the corridor leading to the courtyard at the back.

Filippo spots Signor Trotti briskly climbing the stairs, accompanied by one of his lieutenants. Brancaccio is nowhere to be seen.

Someone runs back into the hall. 'Blood!' he shouts triumphantly, brandishing a jar. 'I have found the blood! It even says blood on the label! In their German!'

Filippo pursues Signor Trotti up the stairs. At the top, the door into the bedchamber is already open. He can hear a series of grunts. He pushes through to find poor Abraham Mendes lying on his bed, the bedding in disarray. Signor Trotti is stooped over him like a physician over his patient, or a dog over its meal.

'Signore!' Filippo protests. He tries to push him away, but the young courtier's slender build proves deceptive, and Filippo's efforts are easily repulsed.

'He is an old man, a friend of the duke!' Filippo protests, daring to slap his shoulder. 'This is the podestá's business! It is for him to enforce the law!'

This wretch Trotti turns. There is a look of calm resolve in the young man's narrow face. 'You are right, fattore. We will take him to the castello, where the podestá can question him. So we might learn what he has done with our boy.'

He leans over the bed, and picks Abraham up. In the cavaliere's arms, the usually vigorous and sharp-witted man of more than sixty summers is as frail and sluggish as a starving street child.

Filippo can only watch helplessly from the landing as Trotti's men put Abraham in a chair and bind him to the back and legs. They lift the chair, and carry him from the house, like an effigy on a saint's day.

The Angel of Ferrara

Filippo stands in the stableyard of the Palazzo San Francesco, the gates firmly locked behind him, and inhales air laced with the familiar, warm smells of silage, horse dung, lamp oil and kitchen spices. His heart and stomach begin to settle.

The cardinal's palazzo is only a few hundred paces from the main piazza, closer still to the ghetto—a short walk down the Giovecca. Yet the madness already seems distant, like the antic ceremonies of natives across the seas.

He walks across the yard, and is surrounded by the relics of the renovations: offcuts of the pale Sienese marble used in the cardinal's suite, Carrarese granite for the fireplace in his eminence's new presence chamber, planks of the Lughese panelling for his eminence's bathroom—at least six thousand lire-worth of materials, all settled on Jewish credit, along with the new Venetian tapestries in the Great Hall, while not forgetting the harpsichord rented for the wedding concert, and the food for the banquet...

This wretched boy Angelo. Where is he? What has happened to him? Why did that shrill mother of his not pay better attention to him? How come no one looked for him the evening of his disappearance, when there might have been a chance of finding him?

Filippo walks over to the doorway leading down to the treasury and fetches the keys from beneath his tunic. He takes the lamp from its bracket to illuminate the keyhole, and unlocks the door, turning the latch as slowly and gently as he can in case anyone should hear him. He enters, locks himself in, and descends the stone steps to the cold, windowless room that sits in the foundations of the palazzo's main wing.

The great treasure chest sits like a coffin in a royal mausoleum. Filippo takes another key, and grapples with the stiff padlock, the metal biting painfully into cold fingers. He lifts the lid and carefully removes the cardinal's old episcopal vestments. There is enough gold in the threads for a dazzling display but, perhaps, melted down, barely enough to make a signet ring.

He lifts out the money box at the bottom of the chest and opens it with another key. Inside is the paper, most of it drawn up by the Jews. He riffles through the documents, the jagged edges of the bonds' indentures like the decorative hems of

petticoats. Six thousand, nine hundred and fifty eight scudi—that is the total debt these bonds currently amount to, roughly calculated according to the most recent rates of exchange that could be got in Venice. These were responsible for generating the magnificence of a great house, for making Don Luigi one of the most potent figures of the cura, bringing him to the very threshold of the pope's baldachin—these fragile slips of paper.

He puts them in a neat pile to one side, and picks up the purse lying beneath them, weighing it in his hand.

No one other than Filippo—including even his eminence—knows how little this bag weighs, and if anyone were to find out...the consequences are beyond imagining. All these years, the cardinal's rivals, even his courtiers and staff, have assumed this room to be as full of treasure as the Lydian king's—the rents from his eminence's estates, the livings of his churches and monasteries, the income from his indulgences, creating an inexhaustible pile of gold. And all these years the fattore has had to be as inventive as the poet Tasso to maintain the illusion.

He empties the contents of the purse onto the floor. A small pile of coins tumbles onto the beaten earth—florins, the regrettable truth being that, in times of emergency, Florence's currency is always in short supply, but still considered more exchangeable than the duke's lira marchesana. He counts the coins, a fruitless exercise, as the result is one already known: eighty six. He pockets ten, and puts the dwindled remainder back in the purse.

He closes the purse and puts it in the box. He locks the box, the chest containing the box and the chamber containing the chest: hollowness containing hollowness containing hollowness.

He walks back out into the stable yard, and through to the loggia of the Great Court. He stops for a moment to gather himself, gazing at the sharp geometry of moonlight cast by the palazzo's front wing over the orchard wall.

He proceeds along the paved path, silvery in the light, to the Great Stairs, and climbs them to the vestibule of the hall. At the top, he finds the door ajar. The fan of light spread across the floor shows that, finally, the tiler has finished. The white and

morello marble bought at such great cost in Verona is elegant in a simple chequered pattern.

He pushes gently at the door. The weight of the dense polished timber and smooth glide of the hinges provides a fitting and satisfying movement for entering the sala grande.

The smell of drying paint, plaster and molten solder fills the Great Hall and stings his nostrils.

The space is thirty paces long and ten wide, once the same but now three-quarters the size of the duke's great hall in the Palazzo del Corte, which has recently been extended by knocking through several internal walls. Thirty by ten paces was sufficient, in Filippo's judgment, to accommodate any event worth the staging—more than enough for the Concerto delle Donne's performance later in the week, a much-anticipated highlight of the wedding revels.

But when Don Luigi had first heard the news of his brother's architectural plans, he had developed a passionate conviction that he needed a bigger hall.

He would point at the wall running along the side of the courtyard and say to Filippo, why not? Why not remove that wall, crazed with cracks from the great earthquake, and build a new one here, say three paces into the courtyard? What are we to lose? A few strands of knot garden, which he had never particularly liked.

Several weeks of patient diplomacy were needed to persuade his eminence out of the idea. The cost would have been crippling, because it would require not only demolishing and rebuilding a structural wall running the length of the main wing of the palazzo, but an entire new roof, the gables of the existing one being too steep to be extended.

A cheaper remedy, Filippo had realised, was simply to press the cardinal to pay a visit to his brother's hall, which jealousy had made him reluctant to do. Curiosity have thankfully prevailed, and Don Luigi had returned from the visit full of scorn, pointing out that the proportions were all wrong, making it more like a hay barn than a hall.

The Angel of Ferrara

This had invited his eminence's amenability to Filippo's thriftier proposal, which was a general refurbishment not only of the dated decor of the palace's existing hall, but of the vestibule and the Great Stairs, as well as the cardinal's private apartments.

Patient effort was rewarded, and is now vindicated by what Filippo beholds: the huge tapestries lining the walls, a beautifully carved medallion featuring the cardinal's personal device, an eagle, over the doorway, a large walnut chest with panels showing hunting scenes featuring a recognisable Luigi in various daring pursuits and—the crowning glory—a new ceiling in the final stages of gilding, an upturned plot of ravishing delights, planted with roses and marigolds, dangling fruits and knotted vines. After months of work, several arguments and many interruptions, completion is teasingly within reach, and the result will be a room to rival and perhaps even surpass the most magnificent in all Italy.

A rickety scaffold stands in the centre of the room on stumps wrapped with cloth, so as not to scratch a floor relaid with polished rosewood tiles. A pool of light is spread across the section of ceiling above the scaffold's upper platform.

'Maestro,' Filippo calls.

He gets no response, so repeats the call, louder.

'Maestro!'

'What,' comes an irritable reply from the platform.

A series of thumps announces Baptista di Milano crawling on his elbows and knees over to the edge of the platform.

'You want me to get this finished?' he says.

'I have something for you. In my chamber.'

'What?'

'Just come with me,' Filippo says. 'It will be worth your while.'

Baptista does not move.

The Angel of Ferrara

'I promise.' Filippo taps his pocket, which chinks with the coins. To any craftsman the fattore knows, the sound is impossible to resist. Baptista duly swings a leg over the edge of the scaffold and climbs down.

§

The most hated man in Ferrara sits by his table, darning his shirt with a bone needle, trying to make the rip invisible with an inventive stitch. A freshly kindled fire casts a gentle warmth over his hunched shoulders.

A crackle of grit hits the one of the panes of glass. Jacomo Bonaccioli lays the shirt down on the table and crosses over to the window, parting the curtain with a finger. A man skulks next to the stable door. The fool has made no effort to disguise himself. Jacomo easily recognises the anxious face of the mason Emilio Rossi, caught in the light of the lamp hanging in the portico of the church opposite.

Jacomo wipes his hands, and descends into stable. He opens the door and grabs the mason's arm. Pulling him in, the surprised Emilio trips and falls on a sheaf of straw. The movement causes the horse to shift in his stall, and the nervous mason cries out in terror.

'Only Bayardo,' Jacomo reassures him, pushing the door closed before offering a hand to help him back to his feet. 'My barbarian.'

In the light coming from the hatch above them, Rossi's face is gaunt, his eyes like two empty postholes.

Jacomo climbs back up to his room and returns to darning. Eventually, the mason's head surfaces. He looks nervously around, like a mouse poking its head out of its hole, before summoning the courage to climb the trap door and step onto the carpet. His cheeks are sallow and streaked with dirt, as though he has been weeping.

Fingering his cap, he watches Jacomo while he continues his sewing.

'You know what it will cost, for an honest tradesman like yourself to be seen coming to my house, undisguised?' Jacomo says, pulling at the needle and peering at the stitch.

'I need your help, colletore.'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘I am sure you do,’ Giacomo says. ‘And the sexton in the church opposite appreciates that. He keeps vigil over my door, knowing the desperation that drives a man to the debt collector’s door, and likes to try and blackmail unfortunates he sees visiting. So we can only hope he did not recognise you.’

Emilio glances in alarm at the curtained window.

‘You’re on the turkey rug.’ Giacomo indicates by pointing his needle. ‘Lord Laderchi pawned it to gain some relief on his arrears, and I don’t think the duke’s chamberlain will want it back soiled.’

The mason looks down at his feet and, realising his mistake, springs smartly back so he is standing on the floorboards.

Jacomo inspects his repair, tugging at the sleeve to test the strength of the seam. Satisfied with the result, he pulls on the shirt.

‘Well, muratore?’ he prompts, looking down as he aligns the ivory buttons with the holes.

Men come tongue-tied to his rooms, because what brings them there are matters they do not want to speak about: their gambling debts, the dowries on their daughters, the defaults of their patrons, the fees of a greedy physician or apothecary to treat a sick child.

Rossi fiddles in his pocket and produces a necklace. He steps forward to place it on the table, then retreats.

Jacomo would never have expected such a beautiful piece to come from the pocket of a mason. It is made up of large black spherical beads, possibly obsidian, set in an intricately woven mesh of silver wire.

‘It’s not often you see even a mason handling stones of this quality.’ He picks them up and inspects them in the lamp light. ‘You looking to pawn them?’

‘They are for you, collettore,’ the mason says, his voice high-pitched.

‘Me?’

‘They are my wife’s.’

‘Really?’

‘My son, Angelo.’ The voice starts to break up.

‘What about him?’

The mason looks surprised. ‘You have not heard?’

‘What have I not heard?’

‘He has been taken. By the Jews.’

Jacomo drops his hand, the necklace still tangled round his fingers, as he looks at Rossi.

‘He disappeared after practice at the cathedral,’ the mason continues shakily. ‘He is a chorister there. Tuesday of last week. He did not come...’ He has to collect himself. The nervousness seems to make what must be a strong body dissolve beneath his fustian cloak. ‘He has not been seen since.’

He shuffles closer to the table.

‘That is to get him back,’ the mason says, pointing at the necklace. ‘It’s worth - ’

‘I know what this is worth, messer. A lot more than a mason even as devoted as you could afford for his wife.’

‘Please, colletore. I just want you to go to the Jews.’

‘What makes you think they have him?’ Jacomo asks, looking at the jewels again, puzzling over their familiarity.

‘There was a search, earlier, some dogs, belonging to my lord Trotti, the scent of my boy...’ The mason coughs. ‘Scent from my boy’s clothes took them to the door of one of the moneylenders in the ghetto—Abraham Mendes.’

Jacomo looks up.

‘Old Mendes? Are you joking?’

‘I promise, promise, colletore. I was there. I saw them take him off to the castello.’

The shock seems to prompt a memory. Jacomo’s gaze returns to the necklace.

Then he strides over to Rossi and grabs his lapels with one hand.

‘Colletore!’ Rossi begs, his legs buckling, so he almost hangs loose in Jacomo’s grasp.

‘What are you doing with these, Messer Rossi?’ Jacomo says, shaking the necklace in the man’s face. ‘What are you doing with Tarquinia Molza’s jewels?’

§

‘You have been up there all day?’ Filippo asks Baptista, as they walk across the stable yard.

‘Mother of God, fattore, please. I am working as hard as I can.’ He is still wiping the white sizing off his stubby fingers with a leather cloth.

‘Not stopped to talk to anyone?’

‘Not been down even for a piss. I use a pot up on the scaffold, to mix with the sizing—adds to the colour.’

Filippo turns to find the craftsman wearing an inscrutable smirk, making it impossible to tell if he is joking.

They climb the steps leading to the upper rooms of the stable block. The corridor to Filippo’s room is dark. His fingers stroke the wall so he can feel the way.

He unlocks his door and pushes it open. It bangs against the cassone. He enters, and lights the candle on his desk. The orderliness of the room is a relief: the books all neatly piled on the desk, in date order, his writing instruments laid out on a cloth like a set of barber’s blades.

Baptista follows, and marvels at the enormous chest behind the door. He runs a hand over the cassone’s lid. ‘Fattore,’ he says, admiring the painted panels.

‘It is his eminence’s wedding present to his brother the duke,’ Filippo explains. ‘I have been accommodating it while it awaits repairs.’

The front panel is divided into two, one half depicting Romulus becoming betrothed to Hersilia, the other their wedding celebrations. Inspecting a corner, Baptista finds a blunted edge, and runs his thumb along it.

The clip of the coins being laid out in a row on the desk distracts the artist.

‘There,’ Filippo says, with satisfaction.

Baptista stares at them in disbelief. ‘Florins?’

‘Gold for the gilding.’ Filippo gestures to them. ‘In recognition of your great efforts, and to ensure that nothing will prevent you from completing your labours in the agreed time.’

‘You paying me in coin?’ Incredulity is becoming suspicion. ‘Something happened?’ he asks.

Filippo clips down another coin and points to the wedding chest.

‘And that to repair the damage, by Sunday’s blessing ceremony in the cathedral.’

Baptista turns back to the cassone.

‘Happened when it was loaded into a cart in Venice, I understand,’ Filippo explains.

‘I don’t know,’ Baptista says, pinching a lip. ‘The moulding needs an inlay of a new wood - ’

Filippo lays down one more coin—the tenth.

Baptista turns back to look at the gold necklace spanning the desk, from him to Filippo. Happy to accept his good fortune, he brushes the coins into his palm. ‘Will all our commissions now be on cash terms, *fattore*?’

Filippo picks up a flat object covered with a velvet drape leaning against the wall next to his chair, and lays it carefully on the desk.

‘I also want your opinion on this, his eminence trusting your discrimination on such matters.’

He removes the drape, to reveal the small painting. He turns it round so it faces Baptista. The artist bends over it, rubbing his stubble.

‘An art merchant from Venice wanted me to appraise it, as a piece perhaps fitting for one of his eminence’s private chambers.’ Filippo’s tone is casual, but even upside down, it evokes a flutter of excitement. The depiction of Roman knights on rearing steeds plunging into the Carthaginian cavalry is as vivid as any battle scene Filippo has seen. Some of their turbaned enemies have tumbled onto the ground, and beg for

mercy, while in the distance a line of elephants have broken into a disorderly stampede, picking up soldiers in their trunks and flinging them into the air. Soot-black storm clouds roll overhead, and somewhere deep in the background a great explosion, or perhaps a bolt of lightning, provides dramatic lightning.

‘From the workshop of Ettore Bonacossi.’

Art is not an area of expertise, but it is surely worth five, even ten times the price Filippo paid.

Baptista nods sagely, then says ‘Who?’

‘Errote Bonacossi? He is well known and highly regarded, at least in Venice. The dealer said.’

‘I don’t know him.’

Professional jealousy. Of course Baptista knows him.

Baptista hoists his heavy eyebrows, and rubs a hairy forearm as he assesses it.

‘I was uncertain whether it would be suitable, perhaps in Don Luigi’s bedchamber, or even in the presence chamber,’ Filippo explains.

The cardinal likes battle scenes. He has them all over the palazzo, in the villa in Tivoli and in the house in Rome. There are depictions of the Battle of Lepanto, the siege of Troy, the attack of the Gauls. They feature huge armies, cavorting cavalries, vast fleets. But none of them has elephants.

‘I saw it during my last visit, and I found it invited me to buy it. Though of course I have arranged many commissions on Don Luigi’s behalf, I have never dared buy a panel for his eminence on my own initiative. We know how discriminating he is—well, you know better than any one, so...’

Baptista leans down to look at it more closely, and Filippo eagerly awaits the appraisal. It feels like a mouse is running around inside his chest.

‘You need me to tell you?’ Baptista asks.

Filippo feels a leap of excitement. ‘He would like it?’

‘Loathe it. It’s hideous.’

‘What?’ Filippo is astonished.

‘Can’t you see, *fattore*? The treatment...’ Baptista apparently does not know where to begin. He shakes a finger to pick out the features that he finds so repugnant, but there are so many, he surrenders with a shrug. ‘I trust you have not committed to buying it.’

Filippo shakes his head. He covers up the gift he had bought for the cardinal, a token of love from a loyal factor to his great master, purchased with funds saved over more than a year from a humble stipend. He places it back on the floor.

‘No. Of course not,’ he says.

§

Rossi passes beneath the archways over the Via della Volte, stopping in the shadows, glancing around an empty street like a thief.

‘Just get on with it,’ Giacomo whispers to him, giving him a light shove.

The mason stumbles on, until he reaches a modest but well-appointed house about half way along the street, with glazed windows and stone lintels.

‘Here?’ Giacomo asks. The mason nods. ‘Knock, then.’ Giacomo leans up against the wall on the opposite side of the door so he will not be seen when it is opened.

The poor mason’s shaking hand merely brushes the woodwork, so Giacomo gives the door a sharp rap.

There is no reply.

Giacomo squints through the ground floor window. The curtain is drawn, but a faint glow bleeds through the flaps.

He grabs the mason.

‘Call to her.’

Rossi shakes his head in terror.

‘So you are a thief.’

‘No, *colletore*, honest, please, it’s just, I’m not supposed to...’

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‘Not supposed to what?’

Rossi is struck dumb. He turns to her door, trembling, looking at it as though it leads to Hades.

‘Call,’ Jacomo tells him, ‘quietly, and don’t mention me.’

The mason clears his throat and leans into it. ‘Donna Molza. It is Emilio Rossi,’ he says in a hoarse whisper.

After a few moments, the latch clicks and the door inches open.

‘Madama! I beg you, forgive me!’ the mason blurts.

‘Emilio,’ she can be heard saying.

‘He made me!’ No sooner has his excuse been made than Jacomo shoves him through the doorway, so he nearly collides with the startled Donna Molza.

Seeing Jacomo, she backs away into her room and grabs the poker from next to the fire. She brandishes the tip at Jacomo, but lowers it a little when she recognises him.

Light comes from a candle stuck onto the stub of another. The room is cluttered and untidy, the desk strewn with books and papers, the floor with shoes. There is a fruit bowl with a few prunes in it. A strange musical instrument, like a model of a torture engine with its wires and rollers, lies across a frayed couch. A stand with sheets of music on it has other sheets scattered around its feet. The feeble fire is clogged with ash. A doorway leads off into what looks like a pantry. The smell of herbs and tinctures is strong.

Jacomo takes the necklace from his pocket, and lays it on the desk, on top of papers covered with strange symbols and drawings.

‘What is this, witchcraft?’ he asks, picking one up.

‘Why you are here?’ she asks.

Jacomo peers into the pantry. In the gloom, he can see lines of bottles on shelves.

‘Where’s the cat?’ he asks.

‘Colletore?’ she calls.

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He steps back into the parlour. 'The necklace is yours, yes?'

She does not even glance at it, keeping her eyes on him, her slender nose like a beak that she might be ready to jab into his face. Her hair is unruly, a great tangle of thick, blonde tresses tied into a bunch at the back of her long neck.

'You can put that down,' he tells her, nodding at the poker. She glances at it as though she had forgotten she held it.

'Madama, I know you told me not to let him know, but he recognised it,' poor Rossi explains. 'The necklace.'

'It is no matter, Emilio' she says to Rossi, raising a reassuring hand to him.

'I saw you wearing it, for the new duchess's intrata last week,' Jacomo adds. 'I assumed this man had stolen it.'

'No,' she says. 'I gave it to him.'

'Why?'

'For the reason stated, to help recover his son Angelo.'

'And what has it got to do with you?'

She wears no makeup, yet her face is a mask. The only sign of worry is the paleness of her knuckles around the handle of the poker, the sinews in her slender forearms flexing.

'The boy is my singing pupil. I am his tutor.'

Jacomo scoffs. 'You would give up that, a necklace of that quality for a mason's son who happens to be your pupil?'

Unlike those of other women of her station, her eyebrows are thick and unplucked, soft as owl feathers, and slightly darker than the smooth skin of her forehead. They lift a little in mild irritation. A light snort leaves her nostrils.

'I wouldn't expect you to understand,' she says.

'Enlighten me. What makes him so valuable?'

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‘That, collettore, demonstrates my point. This is about the value of a child, not a chattel.’

He has heard enough. He turns to Rossi. ‘I hope you get your boy back,’ he tells the poor man.

‘No, wait,’ she says.

But he heads for the door.

‘The duke is in trouble,’ she says, as he reaches the door.

He turns.

‘You know as well as any of us, collettore, our city’s lamentable condition.’ She places the poker back by the fireplace and wipes her hands.

‘I know it is deep in debt. But I am a debt collector. You will not hear me complain.’

‘It goes beyond money.’

‘Madama, mark me—nothing goes beyond money.’

‘The duke’s difficulties producing an heir, the earthquake, the silting up of our great river...a feeling is abroad that the duke’s family, the Estes are ready to fall. The Florentines, the Venetians, the Pope himself, they all sense the weakness. But they do not yet know the true depth of it.’

She lowers her voice, and steps closer to him as though about to share a secret, a slight creasing of the skin forming above the bridge of her nose. ‘If they were to discover the truth, how much trouble we are in, they would be upon our duke like wolves. They will take this city and strip it of its greatness.’

‘Madama, I was asking - ’

She lifts up a hand to silence him. ‘So we need to show our strength to hide our weakness, and our strength is in our music and singing. We remain unsurpassed—we have more accomplished musicians and singers than any other city, but our superiority is slight. The duke for his part has the Concerto delle Donne, in which I have the honour to serve. The cardinal, his brother, has the cathedral choir. These are our

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bulwarks in these battles, colletore.' She nods, sombrely. 'And Angelo: Angelo is in the vanguard, potentially, one of our greatest talents.'

For a moment, she is quiet. Her eyes glance at Rossi, who stands to one side, between the two of them, watching like a spectator at a joust.

'You mistook me, madama,' Jacomo says. 'I did not ask what makes the boy so valuable to the duke or the cardinal or even the city...' He gestures to the jewel. 'I wanted to know what makes him so valuable to you.'

The question catches her by surprise. The rims of her delicate ears redden, and shift slightly as the skin of her scalp tightens.

'I have...nurtured him, devoted a great deal of my time to him, his talent. He has shown great promise, and not everyone appreciates to what degree.' She picks up the necklace and takes a hand to press it into his palm. 'Now, will you help, as you were requested by this unfortunate boy's father, and get Angelo back from the Jews?'

Her fingers are enclosed over his.

'What makes you so sure they have him?' he asks, pulling his hand free, the necklace with it.

'Did Emilio not mention the dogs?'

Her innocence is touching. 'Since his captors have the boy, they have his clothing to lay a trail. They could lead the dogs wherever they wish.'

'I realise, colletore, as you work for the Jews, you want to protect them - '

'I do not work for them.'

'You are being obtuse.'

'I thought you were wanting my help.'

He can see it, her pride being swallowed, the movement in her long, elegant neck.

'When your friends in court fail to pay what they have borrowed,' he explains, 'the Jews can find it difficult to get redress, so they sell the debt to me. Meaning, I pay them some money, and the debt becomes mine.'

'Sorry, colletore. I had not anticipated this to be such a controversy,' she says.

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'The point is, I do not work for anyone,' he says. 'Only myself.'

'Of course. But you know the Jews; you have dealings with them, and unless this boy is found, they will be driven from the city, as, I imagine, will your business, so I would think it in your interests to help us get him back.'

She makes it sound simple.

'How?' he asks.

She is surprised by the question, 'I don't know. Threaten someone. Isn't that what you do?'

He laughs.

'How old is he?' he asks. 'What does he look like?'

'He is twelve years old, about to be thirteen, quite tall for his age.' She glances at Rossi and back at Giacomo. 'He has fair, curly hair - '

'Like you,' Giacomo says.

She looks startled. 'If you like,' she replies.

DAY THREE

Friday, 2nd March, 1579

In the sharp morning sunshine, the Via Sabbioni is in shadow, its jagged roofline like a row of smashed teeth. The street is a mess. Broken furnishings and crockery are strewn around, and what must have been a monstrous fire smoulders at the corner of an alley. Splintered doors and broken windows have been hastily boarded up.

He ducks under the ghetto bar and walks quickly up the road. Through a gap in one of the hoardings, he sees an eye staring at him, then disappearing into the dark.

He reaches the Mendes house. The once sturdy front door lies in fragments on the threshold, robbed of its brass and ironwork. The lattice grilles protecting the ground-floor windows have been wrenched off, and a hamfisted attempt has been made to lever out the doorstep, leaving the once smooth, creamy stone crazed with chips and cracks.

He steps over the wreckage to enter the hall, and feels his boot land on a delicate object that crunches underfoot. He looks down to see he has stepped on the tiny, intricately carved wooden casing that he had passed many times before, fixed to the doorpost at shoulder height—a curious object, which a glance at the fragments shows contained a tiny scroll of parchment. He picks it up and unrolls it to reveal that it is covered minuscule lines of their Jewish script.

He lets the slip flutter to the ground and looks round the hall. It has been stripped of its furnishings—the chair that had stood at the bottom of the stairs, the chest along

the wall, the pictures, the chandelier, the rug. Even the hooks and wainscoting have been torn from the walls. The crude shape of a cross or a dagger has been daubed in red paint where Abraham's treasured portrait of himself had once hung.

'Hello?'

Jacomo's call into the dark interior drains away into silence.

He walks into the pantry, to find the floor covered in smashed jars. Concerned not to damage his boots, he picks his way carefully through the glass shards and the pools of oils and syrups, entering the small chamber beyond. It has been ransacked too, a large hole all that remains of the safebox that had once been cemented into the wall.

He returns to the deserted street and walks back towards the synagogue. Something is lying on the steps—a pig's head, its eyes gleaming in the sunlight, its lips curled into a kind of mocking smile. A trail of sticky blood oozes from its neck across the pale stone, and into the street. Jacomo walks around it and up to the door. He presses his ear to a rivet and listens to the sound of mutterings coming from within.

He bangs the door several times with his fist.

After a brief pause, bolts are drawn back and the door is inched open. Peering at him is the pudgy, sneering face of Bartolomeo Calleone, a bit like the pig's on the doorstep.

'It's him,' the goldsmith says over his shoulder, as though Jacomo was expected. The door is closed. Jacomo can hear raised voices from within, which then fall quiet. Calleone opens the door again.

'You can come in,' he says, sullenly.

It is the first time the collettore has seen inside the temple of the Jews, and the richness of it brings him to a stop. He had always imagined a plain room, matching the exterior, and the Jews' modest style of dress and manner, their bitter herbs and the flat breads they eat. But he is surrounded by sumptuousness to rival any chapel. The walls are panelled in a wood as black as his horse, here and there cut with fretwork as delicate as cobweb. Standing at one end is what looks like an imposing wardrobe inlaid

with mother-of-pearl that would not look out of place in a count's bedchamber. Behind it is a large, arched window glazed in almost transparent glass.

In the centre of the room is a raised platform with elaborate rails around it. A large candelabra sprouting perhaps two dozen gilded arms hangs from the vaulted ceiling. The fixings and furnishings must be worth at least as much as those in the cardinal's church of San Francesco.

Seated on beautifully carved benches lining either side of the chamber are the elders of the tribe, staring at him. Most are recognisable to Giacomo, the Germans on one side, the Spaniards on the other. But there is no sign of their rabbi. Instead, sitting between the two groups, on a chair shifted to the middle of the chamber, near the steps leading up to the wardrobe, is a man the colletore does not recognise. He is small and delicate, like a rodent, with piercing, pinprick eyes. His hair and beard are soft and thick, the colour of bread crust.

'Where is the rabbi?' Giacomo asks.

'Away,' comes the reply.

'So who is this?'

The man smiles. 'David,' he replies, his voice as soft as his hair, 'of Venice, a guest of your prince Duke Alfonso for the wedding revels.'

'I am the colletore' Giacomo tells him. 'I deal with your friends' dead skin.'

The visitor recoils slightly.

'The vulgar name for bad debt in Ferrara,' Calleone explains, pretending a note of disgust, as though it is not a term he has used freely for all the years he has been selling it by the bale to the colletore.

'He buys it from us,' explains Old Roper. 'It is convenient, we find, when there is a default.' The tailor of the colletore's best clothes sits close to the visitor. He seems to be given more respect here than when at his trade.

'And what mission brings you to my brothers' house of worship, colletore?' David asks.

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‘To fetch this boy.’

‘There!’ Calleone is on his feet, full of himself. ‘As bad as the rest with this bloody slander.’

A gesture from David quietens Calleone, and a neighbour tugs at his sleeve. He is slow to lower himself back into his seat.

‘We do not have him,’ David says to Jacomo.

‘I didn’t think you had.’

‘So why come to us?’

‘I think I know how we can get him.’ The bold announcement is met with looks of amazement.

‘How?’ David asks.

‘He is the illegitimate child of a prominent member of the duke’s household.’

‘Who?’ Calleone demands to know.

Jacomo ignores the question.

‘A rival must have found out the child’s real parent,’ he explains, ‘and holds him to extort payment. This business with your brother Mendes is just a ruse, to divert attention.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Calleone asks.

‘A reward will secure his return,’ Jacomo tells them. ‘Twenty scudi should do it.’

Rather than becoming excited by this news, this chance to avoid looming catastrophe, they stare at Jacomo with a curious hesitation.

‘We have just learned that our condotta is suspended,’ David reveals. ‘The duke issued the patent this evening. Our liberties, our protections, our right to trade, the duke’s promise of protection...all has been withdrawn.’

‘But...’ What the rabbi says barely makes sense. ‘That is madness! What about the taxes you pay? The credit you offer?’

‘And the business you leach off us,’ Calleone adds, sourly.

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David glances at Calleone to quieten him, then gestures to Roper, who reaches for a large scroll of paper from beneath his seat and hands it to the Venetian.

The rabbi tries to unroll the sheet of paper on the carpet, but it keeps rolling back up again. Someone fetches prayer books to weigh down the corners, but is stopped, for fear of sacrilege. Instead, Roper pulls off his shoes, and places one at each end.

The angelic face of a boy appears, the curls of his hair tangled with a halo. The boy is naked and stands on an altar, his arms stretched out like Christ's on the cross. He is held up by men standing and crouching around him, each with some scrolled writing next to him in German lettering, which Giacomo cannot read.

The boy's face is calm, as if he is in a dream, while his privates are being hacked off with a knife, and blood spurts in an arc from between his legs into a bowl. At the top of the broadside the name 'Simon of Trento' is printed, over which 'Angelo of Ferrara' has been scrawled.

The temple is now hushed, as everyone's eyes are trapped by the awful image.

'This was found by Messer Roper stuck to his house, after last night's taking of our brother Abraham,' David explains in a quiet voice. 'There is an ancient slander, repeated against our people. Some years back, it led to several of our tribe in Trento being burned at the stake, in the most horrible agonies. Our brothers were accused of crucifying boys such as this Simon. On the almemor.' He points at the platform in the middle of the room. 'They were said, our brothers, to have castrated the child, to drink his blood at the Passover seder.'

Roper rolls the paper up, but the gruesome image still seems to lie on the floor.

'That changes nothing,' Giacomo says, eventually.

David gives him a steady look.

'It is time to go,' he declares. 'We are a people of exile, colletore. We are used to it.'

'That it?' Giacomo says, amazed by the mood of defeat. 'Have I not given you a way of dealing with this?'

'I understand that you are concerned about your business, colletore.'

‘He is afraid,’ Calloene says with glee. ‘He knows he can no longer hide behind our protections.’

Jacomo goes up to the wretch, leans into him until their noses almost touch. ‘I can look after myself, Messer Calleone. It is your brother Messer Mendes you should have care of.’

David comes to Jacomo, and gently takes his elbow. ‘We can only put our hopes in Christian justice,’ he says. He leads Jacomo towards the door.

Jacomo resists for a moment, gazing around. None of the Hebrews will look him in the eye, not one—men he has dealt with for years, whose bad loans he made good, whose risks he has redeemed.

There is no more dealing to be done. He shakes arm free of David and his head in disbelief.

He opens the door on the pig’s head, its eyes staring in at them all, with its evil grin, as though the agent as well as audience of all their plights.

‘Well, at least I leave with something,’ Jacomo says snatching it up by the ear. ‘It will make a fine crackling.’

§

The tapping sound is insistent, like hail on tiles, and becoming louder. A great hand, with beams of light emerging from the fingertips, is reaching out of the sky, and running a nail across the palazzo roof. Tiles scatter like chaff caught in the wind.

Filippo shelters from the falling debris, cowering beneath the garden wall, against the fresco. The whole roof could be ruined, and the cardinal is on his way, due any time.

A figure stands beside the pillar at the base of the Grand Stairs. Surely not his eminence, already arrived? But who else could it be, dressed in those glorious vestments? An actor?

‘Fattore?’

He calls? The voice is not the cardinal’s. It is Fredo the gatekeeper’s voice.

‘Fattore!’

Filippo wakes, sitting bolt upright in his crib. A glance up at his desk reminds him where he is: his chamber over the stable.

‘Fattore?’

A sweat has made his nightgown heavy and cold against his skin. The sheet rolls off his chest into his lap. The banging continues.

Filippo coughs. ‘Fredo?’ His voice is a croak. He climbs to his feet, and shivers. He glances out of the window. The sun is high. He has overslept, something he has not done in years—never done, not at a time like this, when there is so much to be done.

‘We’re besieged!’ the gatekeeper calls. Filippo has never heard him so agitated.

Filippo opens the door to find Fredo pink with effort and excitement.

‘What siege?’ Filippo asks.

‘Merchants. An army of them. At the gate, blocking the way. No one can get in or out of the yard. They want their stone back, the bricks, the wood, the food in the larder, fattore, everything.’

Though this was only to be expected—had even been anticipated, Filippo feels as though his bowels are dropping out of him.

‘I will be down presently,’ he informs the gatekeeper, and closes the door.

His legs tremble and his back aches as he dresses in a modest brown cloak, almost monastical in its simplicity.

He runs down into the courtyard, nearly tripping on his sandals. The gates are still closed, but even over the noise of the farrier at his anvil the hubbub in the street is loud: shouts, calls, and banging at the gate.

He goes over to the hatch, where Fredo is waiting for him.

‘Hear it?’ the gatekeeper says, as though Filippo might have disbelieved him.

The gates tremble with the racket.

‘Open the hatch,’ Filippo orders.

‘Fattore? They will flood in.’

‘Open it.’

Fredo shrugs.

‘Ready?’ he asks, a hand on the latch.

Filippo straightens his shoulders and nods. The latch is lifted and the door swings back to reveal a tightly-packed wall of merchants, their clothes a vivid curtain of extravagant fabrics. Surprised to be confronted by the fattore, they back away, jostling to give him room to climb out into the street. Perhaps more than twenty are there. They have blocked the thoroughfare, and several carts jam the way.

‘Messerì,’ Filippo says, his voice catching, the pitch too high. He coughs, to lower the register. They quieten to listen. ‘I am sorry.’ What for? His eminence’s household owes no apologies. ‘This is difficult.’ He stops, composes himself. They stare at him and he at them for a few moments.

‘We want our goods back,’ says a voice, somewhere off to the side. Filippo cranes to see who made the demand, but the faces he sees are uniform masks of grim resentment.

He holds up his hands. ‘I understand concerns about what is happening. The suspension of the Jews’ trade, it’s...’

‘It’s a calamity!’ yells another voice, as though it is Filippo’s fault.

‘We all of us need a flow of credit to be maintained,’ Filippo says. ‘Money is our blood supply. And now the duke, in his wisdom, has cut it off.’

What is he saying? The stark criticism startles him as much as the merchants.

‘I mean...’ But it is too late for correction, so he ploughs on. ‘But I can assure you, the cardinal’s credit remains good. It is built upon firm foundations, as solid as the palazzo behind me: the rents and livings from his eminence’s estates, churches and monasteries are, as you know, substantial and with Lady Day nearly upon us - ’

The obstreperous apothecary Baexe steps forward, smelling of dry herbs.

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‘So where is the cash, fattore?’ he demands to know. ‘Just this morning, your man was sent to fetch a scruple of saffron, expecting it on the board - ’

‘And Messer Baexe,’ the fattore interrupts, ‘have I ever left you unpaid when payment was due?’

The apothecary has no reply, because he has never gone unpaid.

‘Have any of you gone unpaid? Ever?’ the fattore challenges, now feeling his bile rising. He turns on the chandler, a miserable moaner at the best of times, and pokes him in the chest. ‘Messer Boto, your tallow? Do I not settle promptly on the terms we agreed? And Messer Ricobono, I am particularly surprised to see you here. Have I not been a good customer to you? Do we not order your bricks by the thousand? And have you not received satisfaction for each and every one of them?’

‘Things have changed,’ the brickmaker grumbles.

‘And so must our terms,’ Boto adds. ‘Settlement on delivery. We have delivered, all the stock we have, some of us, for these wedding revels. We need to be paid, or we will be ruined.’

This bold declaration is met with a general murmur of agreement. ‘Cash,’ they start to chant. ‘Cash! Cash!’

A wild impulse overcomes the fattore, a gust of fury at the merchants’ failure to appreciate the palazzo’s unblemished record of honourable negotiation and prompt settlement.

‘Fredo!’ he shouts. The gatekeeper leans through the hatchway. ‘The gates!’

‘Fattore?’

‘Open them.’

‘What, fattore?’

‘The gates!’

The puzzled gatekeeper seems frozen to the spot. So Filippo reaches through the hatch and starts pulling up the bolts himself, watched by all concerned. He pushes the

gates back wide—the effort nearly defeating him—then stands to one side. An extravagant gesture points them to the goods laid across the yard.

‘Go on, then,’ he tells them. ‘Take it.’

‘What?’ Boto asks.

‘Take it, take it all! Whatever we have of yours for which you so suddenly require payment. Messer Baexe your herbs will be found in the larders, as will your candles Messer Boto. And you Messer Ricobono, your bricks are just there, and as for those we have used in the yard wall over there, you are welcome to break it down and retrieve them. And you, Messer Imola...’ The fattore walks up to the meat-curer, who stands more than a head and shoulders over him. ‘After all our trade and traffic, after we supplied the finance for your new smoking shed. Still. You won’t trust his eminence to keep his pledge, so take your meat from the cold store before I am driven to suggest where you might stuff it!’ It is barely believable he is saying these things. It is terrifying and exciting. He swings around to face the others, all staring in gratifying astonishment. ‘And anyone else who no longer wants to enjoy his eminence’s business and patronage—take back what is yours as you please.’

The merchants balk.

‘Go on!’ the fattore yells with wild gesticulations, exulting in his indignation. ‘If you do not trust me, take it!’

He is breathless, watching them. They are poised like a herd of startled cattle, preparing either to charge, or flee.

Then they start to back away, some mumbling, most silent, none bold enough to break with the cardinal’s patronage. It is barely believable that the tactic seems to have worked.

‘You think that will be enough keep them away, fattore?’ Fredo asks, standing by Filippo’s side, impressed by the sight of the merchants sloping off.

‘Not nearly, Fredo,’ Filippo admits, lured by his excitement into reckless candour. ‘They will be back soon, and then we will be in serious trouble.’

The Angel of Ferrara

Though it is evening and several have already wrapped themselves in blankets for the night, the petitioners are on their feet the moment Jacomo is seen approaching the castello gate. They are on his horse like flies, waving their papers, shouting about their supposed injustices. 'Messere, they will not hear my suit,' yells one of them, making Bayardo start. 'The magistrates - they WILL NOT HEAR MY SUIT!' As Jacomo tries to steady the horse, the old, hairless preacher, dressed only in a filthy loincloth, climbs up onto his box near the moat, and starts shrieking about the usurers and the simonists.

Jacomo urges Bayardo through the crowd towards the gatehouse. The captain of the guard and a young sidekick, dressed in their holiday livery for the wedding celebrations, stand at the door of their booth, watching the entertainment.

'What do you want?' the captain snaps, when Jacomo finally reaches him.

'The podestà,' Jacomo replies.

'He's busy.'

'Magnificent creature,' says the sidekick, admiring Bayardo. 'A barbarian, no?' He has the refined voice of a courtier's son.

He runs a hand across Bayardo's shiny, carefully groomed flank.

'Don't touch the horse,' Jacomo warns.

'Vicino,' the captain warns, 'don't touch his horse.'

The boy lifts his filthy hand, but lets it to hover above the coat. The horse's skin twitches.

'I can't let you pass now, Jacomo. Not with all this commotion. Just turn yourself around and go and fleece someone else.'

Jacomo studies the captain with a smile. 'Zanpiero. Do this, and your debt is clear.'

'What?' The captain thinks he has misheard. He steps closer to the horse, lays a hand on its shoulder, then remembers himself and lifts it off. 'You mean that? You would let me off?' he asks.

Jacomo leans over him. 'Just let me through, and I will take it as repayment in full—it is worth that much to me.'

The Angel of Ferrara

The captain stares at Giacomo as though what he has heard a foreign language.

'This is a trick,' he says.

'The colletore does not play tricks.'

'He refers to himself in the third person,' Vicino squeals in a schooled voice.

'Priceless!'

'Quiet,' the captain shouts at his sidekick. 'You promise?' he asks Giacomo, lowering his voice. 'Cancel what I owe? All of it?'

'Captain, you are not going to let him through,' Vicino exclaims.

'Will you shut your fucking mouth!' the captain yells at him, loud enough to cause Bayardo to lurch to the side, forcing the sidekick to skip backwards to dodge the horse's feet.

Silence has descended on the crowd of pensioners, even the hairless preacher, as they watch.

'Sure you can handle that thing?' Vicino says, his voice a whiny squeak.

'My uncle, too?' the captain asks.

Giacomo shakes his head.

'No. Not that feckless waster.'

'Him, or you don't get through.'

Giacomo starts to turn the horse.

The captain raises his hand. 'All right, all right. But me, I am clear, yes? I have your word?'

The question merits no more than a nod.

The captain hesitates, then steps back, clearing the way across the drawbridge.

Vicino looks at his commander with amazement. 'Captain, you're not...'

Giacomo taps his heels and Bayardo is about to head forward when Vicino grabs the halter.

'Vicino...' the captain says, as Bayardo's neck twists.

But the kick of a fine boot has already landed on Vicino's jaw. The young man yelps in pain as his neck snaps back.

Whoops of excitement come from the petitioners.

'Fucking bastard son-of-a-whore,' the sidekick shrieks as Jacomo pulls away.

'Right on all counts,' Jacomo calls over his shoulder, heading through the gatehouse and onto the drawbridge.

§

'How did that sound?' the duchess asks. 'Was it not much better?'

'Try again, my lady,' Tarquinia suggests. She plays the melody on the gravicembalo. The duchess hovers at her shoulder, waiting for encouragement.

'Are you unwell, Donna Molza? The courses, perhaps? Is it that time?' The duchess's prying is girlishly intimate.

Tarquinia's takes her hands from the keyboard and rests them on her lap. Bowing her head, she looks down at her fingers, which tangle with one another. In the cold air of the palazzo's rehearsal room, its echoing emptiness, she feels herself begin to shiver.

The duchess sits down on the bench, next to her.

'Donna Molza?'

Tarquinia turns to her mistress. The fifteen-year-old girl's face is open and charming, the lamplight emphasising the softness of her chin and the chubbiness of youth. But a princess brought up in the scheming world of her father's court must surely see the world in a harsher light. It is not through guilelessness that the Gonzaga family has managed to maintain a grip on Mantua almost as firm as the Estes' on Ferrara.

'Not the courses, highness. Nothing.' Tarquinia puts her hands back on the keys to play the notes, wanting to avoid the remorseless probing, but the duchess gently forces them back to her lap.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘The cares of my lady in waiting, Donna Molza, are mine.’ She grips Tarquinia’s hands. Hers are warm.

‘We should continue our practice. That is the duke’s wish.’

The duchess does not like to be reminded. She gets to her feet and goes over to the window. She stands there for a few moments, ignoring the melody Tarquinia plays, staring out, scratching her neck.

‘I feel very alone here,’ she says, interrupting the music.

‘Highness?’

The duchess sighs melodramatically, as she stares through the glass at the buildings beyond the wall of the duke’s palace, the battlements of the castello towers silhouetted against the glow of a clear evening sky.

‘My husband was not even at our wedding. It was his ambassador, in a dingy room of my father’s coaching house.’

‘Is that not the manner of a royal wedding, highness? To be married by proxy? And is the event not now being properly celebrated here, in your new home?’

Margherita turns to her.

‘But it does not feel like a celebration. Not a true one. Not like the people here really want me.’

‘Highness,’ Tarquinia says quietly, ‘come and sit by me.’ She taps the stool, and the duchess obediently seats herself. Tarquinia takes her hand. The duchess’s eyes are wide with distress and sparkling with tears.

‘There is something I...’ She struggles to find the words. ‘I wish to share, I must share, an issue with my husband, about...when I lie with him.’

She turns Tarquinia’s hand to look at the palm.

‘But I need a friend,’ she says, tracing a line across the skin, ‘someone who has total confidence in me so I can have total confidence in them—someone, Donna Molza, who will open her heart to mine, so I can to her.’ She moves closer. ‘I think we share something, Tarquinia—shall I call you Tarquinia?’ Her brow furrows as she considers

the matter. 'We have only really known each other these past few days. But when I stepped off the duke's bucentauro and you were there to welcome me at the pier, I knew then—I knew we might be close, that you might be a sister to me. In sending you, his highness, my husband, showed such...tact.'

The princess smiles and suddenly embraces her, an awkward manoeuvre while the two of them sit on the stool, side by side.

'Highness,' Tarquinia says, her chin resting on the duchess's shoulder, her shoulders being squeezed, 'with respect, I am just a singer of the court, one who furnishes entertainment, no more.'

The princess releases her, and sits back to look at her with renewed enthusiasm.

'But you have a sympathy.'

'Thank you, highness.' But the duchess is not finished.

'I can see you have suffered—the loss of a husband, the lack of a child, it has left you with a great weight of suffering, and you carry it with such...poise.'

The insight is so penetrating, the unmasking of Tarquinia's distress is so unexpected, it takes all her strength to keep her composure.

'You mean, I am old, highness.' She manages a weak smile.' Now, we should - ' She again reaches for the keyboard, but the duchess snatches her hands.

'You live alone, do you not?'

'Quite comfortably, highness,' Tarquinia says quickly, 'by the duke's grace.'

The duchess narrows her eyes, tightening her grip of Tarquinia's hands.

'You need another husband.'

'Highness?'

The duchess's capricious humour has made yet another alarming shift.

'I will not allow such a beautiful, talented woman to spend the rest of her life in widow's weeds.'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Please, highness, you must not concern yourself!’ Tarquinia tries to rein back the shock with a little laugh.

The duchess leans away, a flicker of annoyance creasing her brow.

‘I am your mistress, Tarquinia. It is my place to concern myself.’ She leans forward again, eyes narrowing, as this girl decides how to solve the problems she presumes a woman more than double her age suffers.

A hesitant tap at the door makes them both start. Margherita grips Tarquinia’s sleeve.

‘It is him!’ she whispers.

‘The duke?’

‘He wants to hear me - he said.’ She gets to her feet and backs away into the corner of the room, behind the gravicembalo, using the instrument as a shield. ‘You must tell him I cannot perform, Tarquinia, not yet, not this evening,’ Margherita hisses. ‘Tell him I am not ready!’

Tarquinia stands, adjusts her dress, and goes over to the door. She opens it, to find a page.

‘Who is it?’ Margherita calls, quickly realising the visitor is not the duke.

‘No one, highness,’ Tarquinia says, pushing the boy back into the corridor so he will not be seen.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispers to the terrified child, pulling the door to behind her. ‘Rehearsals are not to be disturbed.’

A trembling hand proffers a cap with a black headband and a red top. Recognition comes quickly, like a spike pushed into the stomach. She snatches it from him.

‘Where did you come by this?’

‘Tarquinia?’ the duchess calls.

The boy is tongue-tied. His eyes dance around.

‘Tell me, quick!’ she orders him, jerking his sleeve.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Messenger came with it, signora,’ he says. ‘You lost it, he said, and wanted it returned directly.’

‘Go,’ Tarquinia commands.

She feels paper crackling in the cap’s headband. She folds it back to see a note rolled into the lining.

‘Tarquinia?’

She hurriedly stuffs the cap into her stocking. She checks her skirts are smooth, and re-enters the rehearsal room.

Margherita is out from behind the gravicembalo.

‘Who was it?’ she asks.

Tarquinia composes herself.

‘He is on his way,’ she announces.

‘What?’

‘The duke may come presently, highness. We had better proceed, see what we can achieve by the next bell.’

The duchess’s eyes are on her as she walks swiftly back to the stool of the gravicembalo and plays the opening chord.

§

Jacomo slows Bayardo to a walk as they cross the castle drawbridge. They keep to the side to avoid the worst of the rotting wood. The timbers are spongy beneath the horse’s hooves, threatening to break and plunge them into the stinking moat far below.

They reach firm ground on the other side and enter the tunnel passing beneath the Lion Tower. They emerge into the main courtyard, lit by sconces. Jacomo waits for a moment, looking around. A boy comes out from the undercroft, carrying a loop of rope.

‘Tell the podestà the colletore is here to see him,’ Jacomo says, dismounting. ‘Tell him I have some information, regarding the Jew.’

The Angel of Ferrara

The boy dithers, gazing at Jacomo with round eyes, then disappears through the entranceway leading to the castle stairs.

Jacomo ties Bayardo to a post and walks into centre of the silent court, rubbing his arms to warm himself in the evening chill. He gazes across the murals, covering cracks left by the earthquake. They show a ghostly parade of the duke's ancestors painted in grey and bronze, so they look like statues.

'Ugly fucking bunch.'

Ugo Negrisololo walks across the courtyard, a grin widening his already wide, warty face.

'You're one to speak,' Jacomo replies.

The podestá's eyes are tired, the jowls baggy and the smile perhaps loose with drink.

'All the way back to the Trojans, the duke's line,' he says, coming to stand next to Jacomo's shoulder. 'And unless the duke manages to get his flaccid old yard into his frisky new filly, they could be gone in a generation.'

He sighs and shakes his head.

'The duke needs to restore the condotta, podestá,' Jacomo says. 'Or the Jews will leave.'

Negrisololo continues to survey the murals, as though the last time he will see them.

'If they go,' Jacomo reminds him, 'so will their credit, the money they lend, their taxes and dues. It will all dry up—like the river. The treasury will be empty in weeks, perhaps days.'

'And you will go out of business,' the podestá adds.

'Along with everybody else.'

The podestá turns to him and smiles. He holds out a hand. 'Come with me,' he says.

'Podestá, aren't you listening? You have to do something to stop this.'

Negrisololo waggles his fingers at Jacomo. 'I have something to show you.' His calloused palm grabs Jacomo's wrist.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo resists.

‘Please, collettore.’ Negrisolò is suddenly sincere.

The podestà has never pleaded before. Jacomo yields to a tug, and is led across the court. But, as they reach the steps leading down to the undercroft, he yanks his wrist free.

‘How do I know you are not going to lock me up again?’ he asks.

Negrisolò looks at him, his face full of earnestness. Then he descends into the freezing gloom. Some keys can be heard turning in a lock. A door scrapes open.

‘Coming?’ the voice calls.

Curiosity getting the better of caution, Jacomo goes down the steps and enters a narrow passageway. The air is damp, smelling of brick dust and butter, with a hint of rot.

Another door is opened ahead. The rotting smell becomes stronger. A small oil lamp glows in a niche next to the door. Negrisolò uses it to ignite a match, and lights a line of sconces. A gallery of low cellars appears. In the alcoves between the supporting pillars, large storage tuns sit on their sides on cradles.

Further ahead, next to one of the barrels with its lid swung open like a door, is a table with what looks like a dining service laid out on it, shrouded with a sheet. Negrisolò walks over to it.

Jacomo stays by the door.

With both hands, Negrisolò grasps two corners of the sheet. ‘Ready?’ he asks, like a conjuror in the piazza. He draws the sheet back to reveal the dead face of a boy perhaps twelve years of age. He has dark hair, and skin like granite, with blue veins.

Even in the cold, dank air, the waft of rank decay rising up from the table is strong.

The sheet is pulled away some more, revealing the chest and torso.

A torso, an abdomen, a pelvis, hips and, between skinny thighs, a dark disk of raw flesh where the boy’s privates should be.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo steps closer. Flaps of fraying skin surround the wound. White maggots seethe in the glistening, rotting flesh. Decay has also split the skin on the lower part of the boy's leg, exposing the shin bone. It is dry, the colour of ivory.

'Turned up last week,' Negrisolo explains, his fingers resting on the edge of the table, as he gazes at the corpse. 'Fresh as a pig out the shambles, when we found him. Dumped on the riverbank, just beyond the San Giorgio Bridge, on the strand there. Could not have been more than a few hours after he had been cut.'

The boy looks just like Poor Simon, wounded in the way shown in the poster the Jewish rabbi had laid out on the synagogue floor.

'This is not Angelo,' Jacomo says. 'He has fair hair.'

Negrisolo juts out a lip. 'Probably a street ragazzo. But you can see our predicament, colletore. He has the injuries the Jews are accused of inflicting.'

Jacomo comes closer, until he is on the edge of the table, opposite to Negrisolo.

'You think Mendes, Old Mendes, really did this?' he asks.

'Blood was found in his house,' the podestá says, without conviction. 'A jar of it.'

'Animal blood,' Jacomo reminds him. 'The Jews trade it, podestá, as well you know. It is a simple used in our medicines. Every apothecary has a jar.'

Negrisolo is no longer listening. He gathers up the sheet and pulls it back over the corpse.

'Abraham could never do this kind of thing,' Jacomo protests. 'He's too old, frail. And the Jews...they just wouldn't.'

Negrisolo looks up at Jacomo. 'A young man is roaming the streets, they say, looking for boys—someone who has regular dealings with the Jews, someone good at grabbing stuff, you know the sort I mean...' He smiles.

'Podestá, you are not going to pin this on me,' Jacomo says, backing away.

'Who, then?'

'Whoever has taken the boy Angelo, the mason's son.'

'And that would be?'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘A disgruntled debtor.’

Negrisolo scoffs. ‘Well, that narrows it.’

‘One of your preening desperadoes in court, or a merchant in one of the guilds who dug in too deep and can’t climb out.’

Negrisolo starts to snuff out the sconces.

‘You have been useful to his highness,’ he says, in a tone almost of regret. ‘A man of your rough grade was needed to impose some financial order among our more extravagant courtiers and merchants. That is why you have enjoyed my generous protection all these years—why those you filched in front of their friends, who you made pawn their most precious possessions, whose houses you raided and purses you emptied, why they would come to me and say, “podestá, I want to kill that bastard colletore” and I would say to them, “you lay a finger on him, and you answer to me”. But...’ he spreads his hands and shrugs, ‘things have changed.’ He extinguishes the final light.

‘What are you saying, podestá?’

‘That, old friend,’ the voice says in the gloom, ‘I think you should leave.’

‘The castello?’

‘The city.’

DAY FOUR

Saturday, 3rd March, 1579

They are coming for him. He can hear them. 'Golem! Golem!', they chant—the old charge of being the monstrous servant of the Jews. Jacomo goes over to his window, to see them coming up the street, twenty or so faces. Even the women have come.

They had been expected, but not so many, and not so soon.

'Golem! Golem!'

The excitement has drawn the sexton out of his church. He stands in the portico, near the door, eager to see what will happen.

They are now outside his house. Two men approach the stable door with a sheaf of straw.

Jacomo opens the window and leans out.

'If that's for my horse,' he shouts down to them, 'I wouldn't bother. He's safely stabled elsewhere.' They pause for a moment, and then he sees them pile the straw up against his stable doors.

Within moments, thick billows of smoke sweep up, and are blown in through the window. Coughing, he stumbles over to the hatch and pulls it open, letting in more smoke. He feels his way down into the stable, to see flames already creeping up the inside of the stable door. He fetches the horse bucket, fills it with water from the cistern, kicks away the wooden prop he had used to secure the door, and shoves the

doors open. As they swing into the street, they sweep away most of the burning straw, and he uses the bucket to douse the flames.

Watched by the crowd, he stamps out the embers, then faces his attackers. He hurls the bucket at them. The rim hits one of the men in the face, who squeals like a piglet. Jacomo struts towards them, bouncing on the balls of his feet, fists and jaw clenched. His boldness makes them back away.

‘Whoever sent you, you can tell them it will take more than a few ingrate pedlars to scare off the colletore.’

For a few moments they gawp. Then one of them steps forward.

‘You took that boy,’ he says.

‘You know that is not true, Zebelino.’

The fat oaf lunges. A butcher he may be, but his jabs are not as sharp as his knives, and he finds the fist aimed at Jacomo’s jaw grabbed, and his arm twisted. Yelling with surprise and pain, he swivels around to ease his arm, loses his balance and lurches sideways. His feet becoming tangled, Jacomo lets go of him and he drops heavily, grunting as his belly bounces on the cobbles.

Now separated from the others, he is easily pinned to the ground with a knee to the ribs, like a pig for slaughter. The butcher gets punched in the head. One of the scoundrel’s friends steps forward, and Jacomo is back on his feet, leaving the butcher groaning on the ground as he squares up to the new hector. But the coward backs off, leaving Jacomo to return to his work, aiming further sharp blows at the butcher’s head, like a crow pecking a snail. Zebelino’s hair shimmers with each impact, as his skull bounces against the cobbles. The yelps from the butcher and squeals for mercy from the crowd go unheard.

Eventually, the man’s wife starts tugging desperately on the shoulder of Jacomo’s jacket, pleading with him to stop. But the colletore must finish his work and stop others making a trial of their valour. The best defence against fear is to dole it out double.

Zebelino’s arms relax, and slip down to his sides. His cries of pain cease.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo stands, and inspects his bleeding knuckles. He turns to the crowd, getting his breath back.

'Anyone?' he challenges, but the crowd are gazing in horror at their defeated champion. The butcher's wife kneels next to him. After a few moments, Zebelino begins to let out a series of short gasps and opens his eyes. They flicker with terror and pain, as the swelling begins to fill the curves of his face. He briefly lifts his head off the cobbles to look around, but it drops back down hard, as though the sinews in his neck have snapped.

'I am the colletore,' Jacomo says to the mob. 'Mess with me, and you will pay, pay in cash.'

But there is a commotion at the back of the crowd. Other men are pushing through. The crowd begins to part, to give them room. Five of them move to the front. They are ready for business, with neckties pulled up over their noses and cudgels in their hands.

Jacomo tries to escape back into his stable, but they grab him. As they aim their blows, the crowd rushes past to ransack Jacomo's house, flickers in the sunlight between flashes of pain.

§

There he sits, his pen in his hand, his head resting on his arm, in a strange, contorted attitude.

'Fattore?'

He does not react. He appears to have fallen into a deep sleep in the midst of writing a bill.

'Fattore?' He lurches awake with a noisy slurp of breath.

'What time is it?' he asks, rubbing his face.

'Evening,' she says.

Saturn is well dignified in his nativity, the horoscope indicating a man of restraint and control, who knows his limits and does not step beyond them. Not much sign of

that at the moment, the peak of his thinning hair standing wildly on end, slaver glistening around the corner of his mouth, the spherical tip of his nose reddened.

From the widening of his eyes, it seems he has just realised who she is. 'Donna Molza?'

She closes the door quietly. The room is cold, cramped and smells of sleep. It is dominated by what would least be expected in such a drab setting: a magnificent cassone, one of the finest she had ever seen, pushed up against a wall like a packing crate. Behind his chair, beneath the heavy eaves of the roof, a rude mattress is rolled out, with the bedding lying in a crumpled heap at one end.

She waits for him to stand, or lean back, or at the very least put down his pen. But he remains frozen, as though she is Medusa.

'Fattore. Excuse this interruption,' she says.

'How did you...?' But he still has not quite recovered his faculties.

His gaze drops to her cloak, and he can see the patches of damp and streaks of mud.

'Did you climb over a wall?' he wonders.

After all these years, the hidden entrance to the palazzo is evidently not known even to the man who must have settled the workmen's bills.

The fattore looks exhausted, his eyes ringed in grey. His bushy grey beard and hair are greasy.

'May I sit?' she asks. She squeezes between the cassone and the desk, and perches on a stool next to the window.

His body straightens.

'Is it about Friday's concert, madame?'

'Fattore - '

'Because I can assure you, everything will be ready - '

'It is not about the concert,' she reassures him.

His bafflement deepens.

'It is about this.'

She removes the letter from her pocket, and slides it across the desk.

'It came, earlier this morning,' she explains. 'Would you mind reading it?'

He unfolds the paper and gazes at it, as though he has never seen lettering before. He looks up, perplexed.

'You are his mother?' he asks. He checks what he has just read. 'You are the mother of mason Rossi's missing boy Angelo?' The paper shakes in his hand as the meaning of the words seem almost to infect him. 'Fifty gold scudi,' he mumbles, reading from the paper. His long, prominent ears turn the colour of moth's wings.

She produces the cap. The tight red and black velvet roll unfurls before him.

'The letter was in the lining. It is his, Angelo's cap. That is my stitching. I gave it to him.'

She turns the cap inside out, flourishes the lining at him.

'Blood,' she says, showing him the rust-coloured smudge. 'My son's blood.'

The fattore springs to his feet his face suddenly excited, the look on his face not one of concern or worry about Angelo's welfare, but relief.

'You must take this to the podestà!' he says.

'I cannot, fattore,' she informs him.

'You must, madame! Don't you see? It vindicates Messer Mendes. How could he be making such extortions if he is in gaol? They will have to release him - '

'Fattore, I cannot,' she repeats, but he is not listening to her.

'And even if the Jews had him, they want him for their rites, not our money. The loss of business they have suffered is worth far more than - '

'Sit down, fattore, please.'

But he still will not listen.

'I know: you are worried about revealing that you are the boy's mother - '

‘Fattore, it is not that.’

But the fattore wades on. ‘I am sure I can draw on my own influence to - ’

‘No, fattore.’

‘Captain Negrisolò will listen to me - ’

She bangs the desk with her hand. ‘I cannot because the boy is the cardinal’s.’

There. That gave the feather-driver a shock.

He stares at her for a moment.

‘What?’ he asks, stupefied.

‘Angelo is the cardinal’s son,’ she says in a quieter voice.

He drops back into his seat as though his muscles have lost the power to lift him.

He stares at her.

‘How come?’ he asks.

The question takes her aback. ‘How do you think?’ she replies. ‘By the usual means.’

‘You were his...’

He cannot bring himself to complete the sentence. ‘Yes, fattore. I was the cardinal’s lover,’ she declares. ‘I shared his bed. We slept together. How much more specific do you want me to be?’

He unexpectedly bridles. ‘Don Luigi may be a cardinal, madame,’ he says, ‘but he has not been ordained. He is an unmarried man like any other, with needs and appetites, and has taken no vow of celibacy.’

‘No,’ she agrees. ‘No sign of that.’

The pomposity deflates as quickly as it swelled.

‘And I am fully aware of his more recent association with my lady the Contessa Machiavella,’ she adds. ‘We do, after all, sing together for his highness.’

The fattore seems to shrink in his chair.

‘So,’ she says. ‘The podestà...’

The Angel of Ferrara

He shakes his head, as at last he seems to accept that the podestà is not an option. He looks down at the desk, his eyes searching. Then he looks up.

‘How can you be sure the child is the cardinal’s?’ he asks. ‘Not someone else’s?’

The question was only to be expected.

‘Being a singer, *fattore*, you mistake me for a whore.’

His cheeks flush with embarrassment, and he resumes his inspection of the desk.

She proceeds with her account, delivered in a brisk and businesslike fashion.

‘When I fell pregnant, I informed Messere Morello,’ she says.

‘Piero Morello?’

‘Then Don Luigi’s steward. Pope Pius had fallen ill and a conclave was expected, so Morello insisted that the news be kept secret, from the cardinal as well as everyone else.’

A flicker in his eye shows that her knowledge of the household’s staff and affairs going back thirteen years is beginning to give her story credibility.

‘He instructed me to visit a certain Albertino, a quacksalver known for a glister that brings a pregnancy to an unnatural end. I was not prepared to submit myself to the pedlar’s ministrations, so I went to see him with my belly bound tight, and told him I had miscarried the child a few days before.’

His eyes flicker up to look at her, thinking he has found a flaw. ‘Would a physician of his experience be so easily misled?’ he asks.

‘I took the precaution of providing evidence of my misfortune for him to inspect, so he might report the outcome back to Morello.’

‘Evidence?’

‘The midden outside the city walls. Suitable ingredients are easily to be found there.’

The image of her scavenging through the city’s rubbish tip for the body parts of aborted fetuses produces a gratifying reflex of horror on the *fattore*’s face.

The Angel of Ferrara

'I took myself off to Venice, where I gave birth to Angelo.'

'When was this, madame?'

'On the Feast of the Annunciation. Which is why I called him Angelo.' An onrush of passion surprises her, and she must pause. She looks out of the window while she collects herself.

'Are you all right, Donna Molza?'

She turns back to him, her composure regained. 'I returned to Ferrara a few months later and handed Angelo over to the Rossis: Emilio and Elizabetta. They were childless and Emilio was prepared to raise the child as his son, allowing me at least the consolation of watching him as he...grew.' She coughs, trying to relieve a powerful swelling sensation in her head.

He has resorted to flattening the ransom note on the desk, working out the creases with his fingers.

'There is something else,' she says.

He does not even look up, but continues with his strange, compulsive action.

'Angelo knows his father is the cardinal.'

His movements stop.

'You told him this?' he asks, quietly.

'We had to. Emilio felt he was owed the truth, to explain why my contact with him must remain secret.'

At last he looks up. 'So, could the blackmail be the mason's?'

She is aghast. 'Of course not, fattore. Emilio is the most loyal, decent man I know. No. Someone else has him, and if he is not recovered soon, he might reveal his paternity to his captors, increasing the stakes considerably.'

Fiorini covers his mouth, his eyebrows arching over wide, grey eyes. She realises now how very afflicted he is, arousing a pang of sympathy. But this mousy man is easily misjudged. He might appear weak and diffident, but he has dealt with the proudest courtiers, the slyest agents and the toughest merchants. He knows how to

serve his master's interests. To have got where he is and maintain his position, to manage one of the most powerful households in all Italy, there must be a splint of ruthlessness propping up that fragile frame.

'Have you told anyone else about Angelo?' he asks.

'Jacomo Bonaccioli.'

He slams his hand on the desk in amazement. 'The colletore?'

'Before receiving the note.'

He closes his eyes. His chest heaves.

'Fattore, what else could I do?' she says. 'I had heard that this Jew Abraham Mendes had taken my son. The colletore has contact with the Jews. It was my only way of finding out if Angelo was in their hands.'

'You told the colletore that you are the mother of this boy?'

'Of course not! That I was his tutor.'

'You think he believed it?' the fattore says.

She has no reply for that question. 'But he knows nothing of Don Luigi's involvement.'

The fattore returns to his compulsive working of the letter.

'Fifty scudi!' he mutters, now using a nail to smooth a corner of the parchment, until it begins to shine. She leans forward and places her hand on his. Her touch has the immediate, almost uncanny effect of causing him to become still.

'We both know Don Luigi's ambition,' she says. 'If it became known that he had fathered my child, there would be a falling out with his brother the duke, and the scandal would put the papacy beyond even his reach. All that manoeuvring to become protodeacon, the courting of the French king, creating this...' She takes her hand from his and gestures towards the window, to the palazzo beyond. '...this splendour that you, fattore, have helped bring about through your careful use of calculation and the quill—all of it will have been for nothing. It would mean the Pope's triple tiara will surely be handed to the Florentine upstart Ferdinando de'Medici.'

The Angel of Ferrara

He remains motionless.

‘The scruple that Don Luigi was unordained when he covered me will not save him.’

The obscene allusion produces a gratifying jolt.

‘Think of it as another investment, fattore. Fifty scudi. That is all it will take to protect your master as well as my son from harm. You must have ten times that in your treasury. Fifty scudi, and the threat is gone.’

He throws himself back in his chair, melodramatically.

‘Blood of Christ,’ he says, to the ceiling.

‘Would you like a moment to compose yourself?’ she says, sharply.

He sits back up and shuffles some papers in an attempt to recover himself.

‘How will I contact you?’ he asks, with a croak in his throat. He coughs into his hand. ‘Discreetly?’

‘Monday, the morning the money is due to be paid, I shall be here with the Concerto delle Donne. The first rehearsal for Friday’s Grand Concerto is that morning.’

He stands, supporting himself on splayed fingers propped on the edge of the desk. He sways slightly, and seems to be in a daze.

‘You know this must be done, for the sake of your master Don Luigi as for the boy,’ she tells him.

He nods, apparently powerless to speak.

§

She has left the room yet her presence is still overwhelming. Those eyes, that hair, skin the sheen of eggshell—unpowdered and unsoaped, she is all the more beautiful, a demonstration of what nature achieves that art cannot.

Yet she wears perfume. That perfume. He holds it in his nostrils. The aroma is unusual but familiar. The tang of evaporating sap is ripened by an almost peppery musk. His head feels light, as though it might lift off his shoulders. No other lady of court uses anything like it.

Then he realises where the smell is from. It is the same as the perfume once used to fragrance the cardinal's leather. He has smelt it on his eminence's purses and bindings. The shock of recognition prompts him suddenly to exhale, as though in savouring it he has committed some sort of indecency.

He looks down at the desk. She has taken the boy's bloodstained cap, but left the letter. He reads it again. Fifty scudi. A vast sum, but perhaps providing a glint of hope, a resolution to this crisis—the return of the boy, the release of the Jew, the resumption of business and some assurance that the cardinal's secret will, for the time being, remain secret, even from the cardinal. But that glint shines in a yawning void of a fathomless confusion and risk.

The note clearly shows the boy has not been taken by the Jews. Why would they imperil their place in the city for the sake even of fifty scudi? The damage Filippo witnessed being done to the Mendes residence, and the catastrophic loss of trade, must surely amount to nearly as much.

So it is not a Jew making this demand. Then who?

Seized by the auditor's investigatory impulse, he goes over to the bookshelf. Pulling out the first volume of the palazzo's Great Ledger is an awkward manoeuvre, and he staggers under the weight and ungainly dimensions of the huge, leather-bound volume as he takes it to the desk. He dumps it down, and a cloud of dust squirts out across the room.

He seats himself, and opens it up. He leafs through the first few blank folios, the paper crackling like greenwood on a fire. The truth about this business of Donna Molza's secret child, along with all the palazzo's affairs, will be somewhere in these pages.

He comes to a table, listing a number of items. He gently flattens out the spread, being careful not to stretch the binding. Black ink has faded to the colour of dried blood. The sharp lines inscribed by newly cut quills have softened. There is a faint smell of cheese.

He finds he is reading the very first entry he made:

The Angel of Ferrara

- Item: Monday - For the appointment of Filippo Fiorini, present valet to his eminence Monsignor Ippolito d'Este, to become forthwith factor to Monsignor Luigi d'Este, a year's salary, together with lodging and diet in the said city of Ferrara, a chamber to be appointed for his sole use to perform his duties at his eminence's seat there, the Palazzo San Francesco - Luigi d'Este - 12 scudi di moneta.

His hand is so steady, the formation of each letter so careful, the straightness of each line so absolutely precise...

The image of their eminences is as vivid and precise as one of Tiziano's portraits. That day, that glorious, ravishing day—the Tivoli gardens were ablaze with roses, acacias and clematis, the cypresses throwing their hard shadows across the terraces. The two princes of the church were waiting for him in the grotto, sitting on a bench before the statue of Diana of Ephesus, her fifteen breasts dangling from her chest and stomach like ripe aubergines.

'Behold, the most boring man in the world!' That was how the ever ebullient Cardinal Ippolito had introduced Filippo to his newly-enrobed nephew. 'The most boring man in the world!' Don Luigi had acknowledged the description with a sardonic smile, and the deal was done, the valet to the uncle became the factor to his nephew, a gift for Don Luigi's investiture.

Filippo forces himself to turn the page, to overcome the nostalgia that grips his body, the yearning to return to those easier days.

The years that followed speed by with the turn of the pages, time and transactions as ephemeral as the thousands of entries he so diligently recorded.

Then he reaches the summer of 1565. Filippo is no expert on pregnancy, but, if Donna Molza was telling the truth, this would surely have been the time she became aware of her condition, and, under Piero Morello's direction, would have consulted the physician Albertino. This was when news had reached Ferrara of Pope Pius's final illness, and Don Luigi had departed for the expected conclave in Rome.

He studies the entries for July, running a finger down the column identifying the recipient of each payment, a list several hundred entries long. Familiar names pass by his finger nail, one or two transactions prompting a particular memory—the purchase

of a horse, a painting, ironwork for the railings along the garden wall. Day after day, the business of the palazzo continues as might be expected, and he feels a sense of lightheaded elation as he approaches the end of the month. Then he reaches 28th July, 1565. On that day, a payment of £5 12s was made to Dottore Albertino. The sight of it, written in his own, clear hand makes him ready to spew over the page.

He inhales, tries to settle himself, and goes back to the bookshelf, like a dog to the cause of its illness. He retrieves another, slimmer volume: the palazzo journal for that period. Inside is a note for Albertino's payment, which records the money being withdrawn directly from the palace chest, rather than added to the usual account of payments to physicians, settled at the end of each Lent term.

Filippo has no memory whatsoever of the transaction. He may have paid the money himself. But then it is one of forty three payments made that day and Filippo has no memory of those either.

The hot bile roils within him.

He returns his attention to the ledger, looking for other payments to Albertino. He finds another, in February 1566, for four lire. Perhaps cash payments made to the doctor were not so irregular. So he looks at the months preceding her pregnancy, and finds another payment made in March of 1565 for three lire. Among the thousands of entries in the ledger, many to apothecaries and physicians working in and around Ferrara, perhaps the presence of the physician is nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps Donna Molza shrewdly guessed there would be a payment made to the doctor around the time of her pregnancy, bogus corroboration designed to persuade Filippo to pay this ransom. He begins to sense a ruse. But, because he is fastidious and possessed by fanatical spirits, and because he is loyal and careful, for his eminence's sake, he cannot leave it there.

He glances out of his window. The moon has set. There cannot be more than six hours left until dawn. He must act quickly.

DAY FIVE

Sunday, 4th March, 1579

They took her child. Now they have stripped her house. Her papers, her ephemerides, her books, her gloves, her theorbo lute, her liquorice, her mithridate, her ink, her ivory comb, her silver pendant, her candlesticks, even the candles—as she slept, they took it all.

All they left was a deposit in a clay jar she is sure the evening before had been empty. A clue? A warning? A taunt? She had poured the substance into the drain, and smashed the jar. But she imagines vapours rising up from the sluice, and poisoning the house.

They did not dare creep up the stairs to violate her, the thieves. The knife was beneath her pillow, and she would have used it. She wishes they had made the attempt. She wishes she could have grabbed one of them and forced him at the knife's point to take her to her son.

There is a knock on the door.

'A friend.' It is the deep, imperturbable voice of the duke's bass. News of the burglary must have spread.

'Signor Brancaccio, a moment.' She is still in her night clothes, and fetches her gown.

The Angel of Ferrara

She answers the door, and the sight of him surprises her nose with the pressure of tears. She sniffs them back.

Signor Brancaccio is a man too easily underrated. In the past, he has brought to mind the saying of her beloved Plato, that the empty vessel makes the loudest noise. But he has always managed to amuse her, and always been a loyal champion of her gifts. And it is surely revealing of his character that he alone of the court has had the care and concern to turn up this dismal morning.

'I came!' he announces, as though from across vast seas, and summoned by some occult discernment of her distress. She steps aside, to let him in.

'Who told you?' she asks, wondering if the duke had heard, which would no doubt revive the duchess's demands for Tarquinia to stop living alone 'like Diana in the forest' and take up residence in her private suite.

Signor Brancaccio gazes across the ransacked room, the ink splattered across the floor, furnishings tipped over, the rifled capcase in the fireplace. His eyes brim with the fat tears that come so easily to those whiskered cheeks.

'I wonder to myself what manner of viper could do such a thing, to the most beautiful and accomplished singer in the world,' he says, his voice crackling like water sucked through a straw. 'Who?'

'I cannot say, signore,' she says, wishing she could say—reveal everything to him, about Angelo, about the ransom, about how in a day's time, if fifty scudi is not found to pay the despoilers of her home, her son will be murdered.

'No,' he says, nodding and sniffing.

She offers him her handkerchief.

'Am I really weeping?' he asks, taking it. He wipes his cheeks and noisily blows his nose. He examines the linen square a little bashfully, then lifts his chest, puffs himself up with a great indrawing of breath, and smiles at her.

'We must clear all this up, set things right,' he announces.

'Signore, you are most kind - '

‘It is dreadful.’

He picks up the capcase.

‘Hidden in the chimney?’ he asks, peering into the hearth.

‘Yes,’ she admits. How foolish to have considered such an obvious hiding place so cunning. He dusts the soot and ash off the case, and hangs it from one of the fireplace hooks, like a trophy, a gesture of defiance against the thieves. He turns and looks down at the drawers and papers scattered across the floor.

She stoops to start gathering them up. He crouches down next to her to help. They are silent for a few moments, him picking casually through the papers as she tries to clear them up.

He finds a piece of music. He stands up to examine it, and starts to hum the tune.

‘Remember?’ she hears him ask.

She does. ‘The duke’s picnic, for the sons of Emperor Maximillian.’

‘The first time we sang together—on the banks of the river, at Brescello.’

A beautiful summer’s day. A harpsichord carried out from the city, and placed on the grass. Luzzaschi himself at the keyboard, accompanying this sublime madrigal.

‘Did we not sing wonderfully?’

‘We did. We sang well,’ she agrees. It was the performance that confirmed her position as the duke’s singer.

‘We were like the waters of the river, eddies and currents flowing together,’ he says. ‘In the days the river flowed freely.’

She is trying to fit a drawer back into the desk, and the runners stick. As she struggles, she becomes aware of him watching her. She turns to look up at him. He has a settled smile on his broad face, his eyes glint.

‘I think it is time,’ he says, gently.

‘Time, signore?’ She gets to her feet, and brushes dust off her knees.

‘Time you were not left unprotected like this, fending for yourself.’

The Angel of Ferrara

She looks down, as if to continue her survey of the damage.

‘Oh, I can take care of myself, signore,’ she explains, reaching to clear up some more papers to demonstrate the point. ‘You know me.’

She notices most of the horoscopes have gone.

He touches her shoulder, to make her face him.

‘You need to be looked after, cared for,’ he tells her.

‘Do I?’ She gives her tone a cool edge.

‘Yes,’ he says, ignoring the change in temperature. ‘There are rumours.’

‘Rumours?’

‘You know, idle talk.’

‘Of what?’ It is hard to rein back a gallop of alarm.

‘My discretion prevents me from being specific, Donna Molza,’ he says. ‘But I assure you, were I your husband, I would take my sword to any rascal who spread it.’

He raises his hand, anticipating her need to speak, and she finds she has no words. His beard seems to droop a little, as his face becomes sombre.

‘I think the duke will give us his blessing’ he says, sombrely, ‘were I your husband—particularly now this has happened.’ He gestures around.

Is this a jest?

She shifts away from the desk, to give herself some room. She adopts a look of formal gratitude.

‘Flattering, of course, signore, but you know I am only just become lady-in-waiting to her highness the duchess. My obligations and duties are to her, for the time being.’ The rebuff is delivered in a crisp, formal but respectful tone.

‘Oh, I would allow you to continue your service to her. I would not mind.’

Her chest empties of air. She had not expected such determination.

The Angel of Ferrara

'I propose we announce it, at the end of the week,' he says, taking advantage of the lull, 'when the cardinal's blessing of our highness the duke's wedding takes place. Would that not add to the joy of the occasion, madame?'

She shakes her head and turns her back on him to continue her work.

'Madame—or should I say, the soon-to-be Signora Brancaccio?'

She pretends to be engrossed in the tidying.

He starts to sing. Sing! Amid the wreckage of her life, the song of Tasso, one she never liked for its cloying sentimentality:

As it is the chorus that makes the dawn,

The sound of rustling leaves and the waters and the winds...

'Please signore, stop,' she pleads.

But his clarion voice carries through the shattered house, and out in to the street.

So in this sweet way the heaven adores Tarquinia,

And, because of her, falls for the earth.

She feels herself drowning in these powerful cadences.

What voice do I hear?

Only hers can it be;

lo, she comes, and Love in her train -

She turns to him. 'Signore!'

Her voice is a match for his, and he stops. He looks puzzled.

'Yes?'

'I cannot...' What can she say that will bring this buffoon back to reality? 'I cannot marry.'

'Is there another?' he asks, innocently.

'Signor Porrino.'

'Your dead husband?' He laughs.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘My late husband. My late, beloved husband.’

‘You would prefer a dead man to a living one? Dust to flesh?’

Brancaccio is not as tactful as other suitors when she invokes the ghost of her late husband. She looks down at her hand, and grips the ring her husband gave her, still around her finger, happily stuck there.

‘I would make you forget him.’ His tone is bragging. She has never heard him use it before. It is as though discovering that the hollow vessel homes a vicious serpent.

‘You will not make me do anything,’ she tells him, her tone as flat as the desktop.

One might have expected by this point that the windbag would deflate, but he grabs her, hooking an arm around her waist and pulls her roughly to him.

‘I can make you my wife,’ he growls, his breath swamping her face. ‘By giving you what you desire.’

‘What, signore?’ she asks, rigid with fury. ‘What do I desire? You? A pampered old warbler who sings me to sleep?’

‘A child.’

The tone is no longer boastful. It is as though he knows something. Is this the subject of the idle talk he mentioned? Are rumours spreading through court about Angelo?

She tugs at his arm to free herself. He releases her slowly, to demonstrate his control.

‘What do you mean?’ she asks. ‘What child?’

A knowing smile transmutes into a look of apparently genuine bafflement. ‘Don’t all women want one?’ he asks.

Another shift in temper—so swift, his earlier manner seems like a phantasm. Has she misjudged him? The burglary of her house has left her addled. The idea that Signor Brancaccio could have kidnapped her child to force her into marrying him is ludicrous.

She composes herself. ‘You will have to excuse me, signore. You took me surprise.’

The Angel of Ferrara

'I took me by surprise!' he declares, smiling broadly, restored to his more familiar self, as though miraculously exorcised of the brute earlier exposed. 'An impulse!' Then he leans towards her. 'But a serious one.'

'Just give me a little time,' she begs, allowing a quieter tone in her voice. 'Until the wedding of his highness is done. Until after the cardinal's concert.'

He smiles.

'Very well,' he says, as though he knows she cannot hold him off forever.

She can see the passion in his small eyes, which glint like the eyes of a boar. She goes to the door and holds it for him.

He steps into the street. She lingers on the threshold, watching him walk back towards the duke's palace. He is almost jaunty, and breaks into song, his powerful baritone swamping the startled passers-by.

So in this sweet way heaven adores Tarquinia,

And, because of her, falls for the earth...

§

The bailiff took his time. Two bells had sounded since dawn before he finally knocked.

'Was she disturbed?' Filippo had asked anxiously, as Moiza dropped the leather sack of spoils onto the desk. The sight of it had produced disgust mixed queasily with excitement.

'She slept through,' Moiza promised, as sincere as liars tend to be. How could he have known she was asleep? Did he steal up to her bedchamber, to spy on her?

'And you left the place...tidy?' Memories were fresh of the bailiff's heavy-handed antics when they searched the riverbanks for Angelo. Any sight of a building or outhouse, Moiza would be breaking down the doors and pulling over the cupboards.

'No, fattore.'

'What? Moiza! I specifically instructed - '

'She was going to notice these things being taken, fattore.' There was this bland manner about him that made his pronouncements even more sinister and Filippo's

feelings of guilt even more intense. 'Leaving it tidy would have raised suspicions, so I made it look like a common burglary. I took some things of value, some trifles.'

The cardinal's bailiff will have to be allowed his booty to keep his silence.

'You must speak to no one about this, understand?' Filippo had reminded him.

'Of course, fattore.'

'Very well.'

But the bailiff had not moved.

'Moiza?'

'Just wondering, fattore,' he had said, with a hint of lewdness, 'what you are wanting with Donna Molza's private things?'

'You think you can extort confidences from me, master bailiff?'

'No, fattore - '

'You think I owe you an explanation?'

'Fattore, I didn't mean - ' The big man was as surprised as the little one by the intensity of his passion.

'Because I might owe his eminence an explanation as to why, for example, the household apothecary bill includes certain very expensive mercurial compounds, used to treat certain morbid conditions suffered by certain members of staff.'

'Fattore, please, honest, I didn't mean anything by it.'

The bailiff had his hands held up, and backed out of the room.

So at last, Filippo is alone with the booty, lying on his desk like a prolapsed womb. Disgust at what he has done almost intensifies the desire. Fingers venture to open up the sack, teasing loose the thong. He reaches in, the biliousness intensifying, and pulls out a large pile of papers and volumes.

Qualms about what he is doing, this violation of her, brings a moment's hesitation—until he catches a glimpse of her hand. It is beautiful, silky, like her singing.

It weaves sinuously across the pages; so different to his cramped, precise and mean style.

He picks out a slender volume. The pale tan of its leather cover is almost the colour of her hair. The binding whispers as he opens it, to reveal a title page. His breath is caught in his mouth. She has written the title in the most graceful cancellaresca script he has ever seen. Two words: 'De amore'. He has seen books of accounts, mathematics, regulations, scriptures and prayers but never of love.

He breathes in as he turns the pages. His fingers pass across the paper, stroking the slight indentations made by the quill's nib. The touch generates a pulse of excitement. He tries to translate what she has written:

'Self love is a man's love of his true self, his essence, not his shadow,' he reads.

His true self.

What self? The self that ordered the burglary of her house? The self that violates a lady's house? That self?

He turns the page. The weave of the paper is the damask of her dress. The words written on the page are strokes of her fingers. 'No man can truly love a woman unless first he loves himself,' he reads. It is as though she is addressing him, and he feels shame at what he has done roll in and engulf him like a freezing mist.

The tolling of another hour forces him back to his senses. He has limited time before the morning's appointment. He stuffs the book in a pocket and starts to sort through the papers. Many are bureaucratic; reading the mundane, cool words settles him a little. He finds a copy of her terms of service to the duke's court. She thanks the duke's chamberlain Laderchi for arranging her pension, a generous sum with a codicil attached allowing her service to be free of the court, so she can live in her own house on the Via delle Volte, and act privately as a tutor and astrological advisor to other citizens, the stipulation being that her clients must dwell within the duke's realms. No member of staff in the cardinal's retinue, let alone the duke's, is allowed such dispensation.

Deeper in the sack is a cache of bills showing the costs—the clothes, musical instruments, copying and scrivenering; steep bills for the grocer and apothecary—some

perhaps accounting for her perfume; credit notes, apparently relating to games of cards. She is not frugal nor methodical in her monetary affairs; she might even be reckless—a discovery that seems to contradict the image of the austere widow. She has weaknesses, appetites, perhaps even ambitions.

The horoscopes are in an untidy bundle, twenty or so, drawn up in the same manner: two squares, one within the other, and the gap between the two divided into triangles. Each figure is scattered with numbers and symbols. From appearances, her art is like a *fattore's*, a matter of manipulating symbols and performing calculations.

The numbers in the smaller, central square appear to represent the time and location of an event, presumably the birth of the subject, identified by a name or initial written along the top—prominent merchants and members of court: the mercer Caro, the physician Lusitanus and his wife, the singer Brancaccio, Beatrice Manfredi the fiancée of Cesare Trotti and the widow Benedetti. He can make little sense of the arrangement of the symbols, though he notes some have in the margin a skull, or the symbols for Mars and Venus intertwined—indicating death, surely, and sexual union.

At the bottom of the pile is a bundle of papers wrapped with ribbon. They smell of soot and smoke. Loosening the ribbon releases a scattering of ash across the desk.

None of these horoscopes are identified by name, but one of them has a familiar date. A few moments are needed to recognise it: his own nativity. The paper maps the placing of the planets on the day life passed from his poor mother to him. A dizzying excitement overcomes him as he struggles to rinse meaning from the arrangement of the figure's occult symbols, but he can make no sense of it. How did she know the date of his birth? Or is it a coincidence, and the chart of another person?

Another of the charts plots the duke's birthday. Attached to it is a document, in French. From his imperfect understanding of the language, he sees that it is about his highness's prospects of producing an heir. 'By the third wife in the fifth decade' is underlined. The signature is that of one calling himself 'Nostradamus'.

Beneath is a set of two horoscopes stitched together along the upper edge. The uppermost figure has the birthdate of the cardinal, that beneath the nativity 'Annuntiatio, 1566, Venice'—the date and place of Angelo's birth. The *fattore* gets up

from his desk and goes over to the window. Below, the stableyard is a hive of activity, and he steps back a little to ensure he is not seen. He holds the stitched figures up to the daylight, so one is superimposed on the other, and sees that, where the positions of the planets coincide, their signs have been ringed in red.

Someone knocks on the door.

He stands quite still, waiting for the visitor to go away.

But the knock is repeated.

‘Fattore?’ The small, hesitant voice belongs to the boy Michele. Filippo’s arms are beginning to ache as he tries not to move.

Gently, the latch is lifted, but Filippo thought to bolt the door. Of course, that tells Michele that Filippo is in the room.

‘Pardon, fattore,’ the boy calls, ‘but the German is here.’

‘What?’ Filippo calls.

‘Herr Fugger?’

‘Oh no,’ Filippo says. He had become so infatuated with the spoils of the night he lost all notion of time. The half bell must have rung, and he did not hear it.

‘Are you sick, fattore?’ the bemused boy asks.

‘Just...just give me a moment,’ Filippo stutters. He stuffs the materials back into the sack, rushes round the desk, opens the cassone, and drops the haul inside. He lowers the top, trapping a finger in the heavy lid. He pulls the finger free. The top bangs shut.

‘Fattore?’ Michele sounds worried.

‘Take him, Herr Fugger to the chapel—no, no, he is a heretic, to the...’ Filippo glances out of the window. ‘To the Great Hall.’

Filippo realises he has not even changed out of his night clothes.

§

Signor Mosto is waiting when Filippo rushes into the receiving chamber, and looks amused by Filippo’s flustered appearance.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Apologies, domine.’ Filippo battles for breath.

Signore raises his thin eyebrows. ‘You said this meeting with Fuster was important.’

‘Fugger, domine.’

‘What?’

‘His name is Herr Fugger.’

‘Fugger? Nasty. Sounds like being sick. The English have such horrible names.’

‘The German is here for the wedding at the duke’s invitation, domine, and graciously agreed to see us at short notice.’

‘Yet you keep us waiting,’ the master-secretary says with genial irritation. ‘You are usually so prompt. Does the most boring man in the world threaten to become interesting?’

‘I am sorry, domine. Pressing matters relating to the preparations for his eminence’s residency.’

‘Ah.’ Signore stands like a tall bird, a crane, his arms neatly folded like wings, his hands grasping the lapels of his robe. The gaze of his sharp eyes are fixed on Filippo. ‘So why are we interrupting these preparations to see this German?’

‘We need his money,’ Filippo says, the shortage of time calling for bluntness. ‘The situation with the Jews—they have stopped lending, so we cannot pay for goods. And there is a particularly pressing need for specie...cash.’

‘Why? What for?’ He shakes a hand at Filippo. ‘No, do not say. I do not want to know. Just tell me that we are not bankrupted, not yet.’

He looks at Filippo, waiting for the reassurance.

‘Fattore?’ Alarm emerges as a nervous laugh.

‘We need this money,’ is all Filippo will say.

The master-secretary stares at Filippo for a few moments, his lips parted.

‘Our prospects are so grim?’

'It is vital, domine, that we secure this German's cooperation. He may be our only hope.'

'Well, you had better not keep him waiting any longer, then,' the master-secretary snaps.

He stands by the door leading into the rear of the hall, waiting for Filippo to open it, composing himself.

As soon as the door is open, a look of confused irritation becomes a charming smile, as, with both arms held out in welcome, the master-secretary walks into the hall.

The banker is sitting on a chair next to one of the chests, staring at the ground, looking ominously bored.

He gets slowly to his feet, a tall man in his fifth or so decade, handsome and smartly presented in a simple brown cap, and a fur stole over a black cloak with wide lapels. Flat cheeks draped from sharp cheekbones sag a little beneath the strong jowls.

A look of mild alarm develops on the banker's face at the prospect of the master-secretary's embrace.

'What is the meaning of this?' he demands to know.

The master-secretary slows his step, Filippo only just managing to dodge his shoulder.

'Of what, Herr Fugger?' Filippo asks.

'I understand one of my agents was in touch with your household as many as six months ago, offering our services, and did not even receive the courtesy of a reply.' It was a year ago, and a reply was sent by return politely declining the ludicrously low offer to invest in some of the cardinal's mining interests. 'And now you keep me waiting once more.'

'Herr Fugger,' Filippo says. 'I assure you - '

'And who is this?' The banker points insolently at the master-secretary, but keeps his gaze on Filippo.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Wilkommen, Herr Fugger,’ the master-secretary replies smoothly. He then speaks some more words in German. Though it is a language the fattore does not understand, mention of ‘meister’ suggests signore is introducing himself.

Herr Fugger is evidently impressed, and says something in response.

Filippo feels a jolt of shame. Of course the master-secretary would be fluent in German, as he is in Spanish and French. For all Signore Mosto’s faults—his laziness, his licentiousness, his pride, his extravagance, his preening vanity—he is a brilliant diplomat, further demonstration of his eminence the cardinal’s shrewdness when it comes to choosing his most senior councillors.

Signore is showing off the Great Hall’s ceiling to Herr Fugger, the extravagance of his gestures suggesting the richness of his description. The gold is dazzling, the sheen and lustre of the saffron is intense, like butter softening in the sun.

‘The lighting,’ the German suddenly says, interrupting the master-secretary’s encomium.

‘Herr Fugger?’

The German gestures impatiently towards the lamps on the tables either side of the main door. ‘Why is there lighting, when the sun is shining?’

‘So you might better appreciate the beauty of the craftsmanship,’ the master-secretary says, frowning with puzzlement.

‘A needless extravagance,’ the German decides.

‘We do not normally have lights in the palace during the day, honore,’ Filippo says, trying to disguise the panic pulsing in his chest. ‘Indeed, we make sure that two servants tour the chambers at an appointed time to ensure all candles, sconces and lamps are snuffed. And, we only use mutton tallow—except, of course, on feast days, holy days and when we have a special visitor like your honour —’

The master-secretary’s look suggests Filippo is gabbling. His mouth snaps shut.

‘Mutton tallow,’ the German says.

‘Yes, honore.’

The Angel of Ferrara

Herr Fugger nods his head, his severe expression softening a little. He makes a noise.

‘Salute!’ the fattore says, assuming a sneeze.

‘He said “seifentalg”, fattore,’ the master-secretary corrects, highly amused. ‘How the Germans term mutton tallow.’ He says something in German to Herr Fugger.

For the first time a smile, which quickly develops into a burst into laughter. Filippo tries not to blush.

The laughing subsides, and the German’s eye catches one of the tapestries.

‘That I like,’ he announces.

‘Rainaldo Boteram, a most accomplished embroiderer, of Bruges,’ the master secretary tells him proudly. ‘You have heard of him?’

‘There are mountains,’ Herr Mosto notes. ‘I am interested in mountains.’

The German wanders over to the tapestry and peers at it, his hands behind his back.

The master-secretary grabs Filippo’s sleeve. ‘Lord, the man is unspeakable,’ he whispers into Filippo’s ear. ‘Money men are, aren’t they? Barbarians!’

They both watch the German.

‘Tell him I am called away,’ the master-secretary says. ‘Tell him - ’

But the German has turned and is walking back towards them.

‘Magnificent, Herr Fugger, no?’ the master-secretary says to him.

The banker shrugs. The embroidery, gilding, carvings and tapestries, the meticulous marquetry on the chests, the delicate leading of the windows and the ingenious tessellation of the floor are not having their desired effect. ‘Perhaps, but I would find it difficult to advise my bank to employ its assets in your bishop’s ventures if all there is to show is nothing but frippery.’ The banker gestures around. ‘Why this, I may be asked, when the merchant adventurers of the Lowlands, or the Venetians in the Levantine trade, clamour for our money and promise returns many times the principal?’

‘Frippery?’ says the master-secretary, his temper beginning to give way.

‘Domine,’ Filippo says, touching his sleeve. But the master-secretary ignores the warning tone.

‘What adventurer can possess works such as these?’ With small, circular motions of the finger, as though spinning a small hoop, he indicates the coffering, the carving, the cornicing of the ceiling. ‘What mercer or spice trader can afford such trappings of greatness—such grandeur, such beauty, such finesse, such elegance and grace? And what could be more precious? Or enduring?’

Filippo dares raise a hand to the master-secretary, to try to stem the ire. Each word is a scudo being dropped down the drain.

‘What else might best give your honour reassurance of our suitability?’ Filippo asks, keeping his voice quiet.

Fugger considers the offer, rocking on his heels.

‘Your books,’ he decides.

The answer demonstrates the recklessness of the question.

‘We do have a most excellent library,’ the master-secretary volunteers, a little surprised but reassured by what he takes to be a display of literary interest. ‘A collection I believe to be unrivalled in the city, even by our university.’

‘I believe honore means our books of accounts, domine,’ Filippo says, trying to keep the desperation from his voice.

‘Oh, the books!’ The master-secretary’s relief is intense. ‘The fattore will be only too delighted to show you those. His chamber is full of them!’

Filippo tries to stifle a look of horror.

‘Now? Domine, I am not sure - ’

‘Of course you are. Of course he is,’ the master-secretary says, eager to mistake hesitancy for modesty. ‘Very good,’ he concludes, rubbing his hands. ‘I must take my leave, Herr Fugger.’ He bows to the banker and, before Filippo has time to object, heads for the door, leaving Fugger looking at Filippo, expectantly.

The Angel of Ferrara

The fattore feels a flush of panic. 'I have only just begun to prepare them for inspection,' he explains. 'I thought that, once heads of an agreement had been inscribed - '

Fugger shakes his head as though he has heard the excuse many times before. His smile is tight, his lips thin. 'So where are they?'

'I have them in my attic chamber, honore,' Filippo admits. His room, where his mattress lies unmade, his clothes unfolded, and his books and papers in goodness only knows what state of disarray on the desk.

'Then lead the way, Herr Florin, lead, now!'

§

Escorting Herr Fugger across the stable yard, anxiety flaps like a fish in Filippo's belly. As they come to the foot of the steps leading up to his chamber, the banker holds back. He looks in amazement at the rickety stairs.

'They put you over the stables?' he asks, astonished, 'the most important man in the household?'

The flattery takes Filippo by surprise, and succeeds only in intensifying his apprehension.

'My needs are modest,' is the best reply he can think of.

Herr Fugger shrugs. He mounts the steps to lead the way up, and follows the narrow corridor to Filippo's room. The German's tall frame means he has to stoop in the cramped accommodation.

He stops as he beholds the cassone, looming over the desk.

'His eminence's wedding present to his brother the duke,' Filippo explains, hoping it might distract the German's attention long enough for him to tidy his bed and desk. 'The panels were painted by...'

But Herr Fugger's eyes have already fixed on the books.

'Er, Herr Fugger...'

The banker pushes by and settles himself in Filippo's seat as though he owns it. Filippo tries to tidy a pile of bills, but the German bats his hands away. To Filippo's horror, he starts pulling open the desk drawers, one by one, working his way down, casting a glance into each. From the lowest, he picks out the pouch containing the cardinal's great seal as he might a pebble on a shore. He peers into the pouch and removes the seal.

'Ah,' he says, seeing what it is. 'They trust you with this.'

He traces the image of his eminence sat upon his cathedra, the crossed keys on either side, the Este eagle above his head. It should be locked away in the treasury, of course, but it has had to be used for so many documents of late, Filippo had entrusted it to an unlocked drawer. What must Herr Fugger think?

The banker now notices the Great Ledger slotted between the side of the desk and the wall, where Filippo had carelessly left it. He lifts it onto the desk and bangs it down.

'What have we here?' he asks, lasciviously parting the covers as he might a maiden's knees.

'Our principle ledger,' Filippo says, transfixed with terror, as he watches the German peruse the opening pages. Fugger licks his thumb, and turns over the large, thick folios. The sight of the imprint of spittle on each page leaves Filippo feeling queasy.

Fugger stops at one of the pages, and leans into it, examining the layout. His eyebrows descend. 'This is most peculiar.'

'What is, Herr Fugger?'

'This.' He stabs at the page.

Filippo looks over Fugger's shoulder. The expenditures are certainly high, but it was the week of one of his eminence's residencies. Is it the cost of firewood? The cardinal likes to bathe in hot water every day, and the bill does escalate sharply.

'Perhaps you might elucidate your concern, honore?'

'The method.'

The Angel of Ferrara

A few moments are needed to realise what the banker is referring to.

‘The system of accounting, you mean?’ Filippo asks.

‘It is foreign to me,’ Fugger says.

Filippo leans over his shoulder. ‘It is the method of Fra Luca Bartolomeo de Paccioli – ’

‘A monk?’ The banker is incredulous. ‘How Romish!’

‘In his *Summa de arithmetica*,’ Filippo continues, ‘he set out how financial affairs might be accounted for, using a principle of balance. Credits verso, debits recto, one reflecting the other, an addition in one requiring a subtraction from the other or vice versa.’

The banker pushes back his cap and absent-mindedly rubs his forehead as he studies the arrangement of numbers.

‘It is not yet used in Augsburg?’ Filippo asks.

Fugger flicks through a few more of the pages.

‘So, this,’ he asks, lowering the finger to point at a particular entry. ‘Explain.’

That.

‘Item. Friday - galero - Luigi d’Este - 24 giulii’ it reads, the red hat bought for Don Luigi’s investiture as cardinal, a gift from his uncle Cardinal Ippolito.

Don Ippolito had modelled it to check the fit, as he claimed to have a head as big as Don Luigi’s, though in truth it was somewhat smaller. Filippo remembers the episode, but had forgotten the cost.

‘An item of expenditure for a hat worn by my master,’ Filippo explains.

‘Twenty four giulii? For a hat?’

‘And there...’ Filippo leans across to point to the page opposite, where a figure of the same magnitude has been written under the heading ‘Vestments’. ‘That is an account of his eminence’s clothes, for the same period.’

‘But you have added the sum...’

The Angel of Ferrara

‘To indicate that we now have a vestment worth that amount, which in time declines, or occasionally rises in value, which I account for here.’ Filippo points to another book. ‘So we know the value of the assets his eminence owns.’

Fugger pouts, drumming on the armrest fingers stained with ink from Filippo’s books. He looks perplexed.

‘It is most singular,’ he says.

‘Herr Fugger?’

‘The Grand Duke Medici. He does not use it.’ Fugger looks expectantly at Filippo, as though an explanation is needed for this novelty.

‘Nor the court of the Gonzaga,’ he adds.

‘I could...redraft, Herr Fugger.’ The suggestion is ludicrous; it should never have been made. It would require days, weeks, months of work.

Fugger looks up at him, jutting out a thin lip. He shakes his head.

‘I do not think so, Herr Factor.’

‘But - ’

The banker continues to peruse the pages spread open before him, his head turning from one to the other, as he follows the flow of payments.

‘So, Herr Fugger...’ Filippo says, feeling any last vestige of hope fading into ash.

Suddenly, the banker bangs the book shut, making Filippo jump. He turns. ‘Never mind the tapestries or that golden ceiling,’ he says. He bangs his hand on the book’s leather cover. ‘These are the cardinal’s true masterpieces.’

‘Honore?’

‘I see now what you are doing, and it is remarkable. It is a most elegant way of accounting for the household expenditures.’ Filippo’s cheeks are hot with confusion. ‘And I shall make it clear to your stiff-necked master-secretary,’ the banker continues, ‘that it is not his gilded halls or teeth that make your household worthy of my bank’s credit, but your books!’

The fattore’s roiling humours are so stirred by this endorsement, he almost faints.

The Angel of Ferrara

Herr Fugger stands, and puts a hand on Filippo's shoulder. 'Philip, my friend. Ludwig, your Don Luigi, is a man of greatness—a famous and important patron, for whom extravagance is a necessity. I understand this, yes? I am not the heretical philistine Herr Mosto takes me for. But his brother Alfonse, the duke, allows the power of the Estes to drain away from this city, like the waters of the River Po. I came here for your duke's wedding, but behind all the colourful garlands and banners, what do I see? I see buildings in the street still with cracks from the earthquake that happened ten years ago...'

'Nine,' the fattore corrects, a defensive reflex.

'Even the castle is cracked, the duke's citadel! I see sections of the city wall collapsed. I see dry irrigation channels in the fields. I see a river silted up and so shallow not even a lotus leaf can float upon it. Why has it not been dredged? I see extravagance in one place, and decrepitude next door. Great dynasties fall this way, do they not, Philip? They fall.'

The assessment is brutal but perfectly expresses opinions that Filippo has long nurtured but had never dared to make public.

'So, the money of my rivals will inevitably flow away,' Fugger concludes.

He turns back for a final glance at the books, stroking his mouth with his hand. Filippo can hear fingers scraping across fine, dark stubble.

'But I, Philip, am a man who does not follow the tide,' he says. 'I understand from my agents that there are certain ores in your cardinal's mountainous estates in Bozen that may prove productive—and, as I mentioned, I am interested in mountains.'

The German awaits confirmation with the raising of his dark, bushy eyebrows. Filippo nods, cautiously.

'A share in the leases might, I think, be sufficient to underwrite a line of credit. And if the numbers you have set out here are as I understand them to be, I will do business with you. Is that acceptable, Philip?'

The sudden introduction of the cardinal's mineral interests makes Filippo's head swirl, as when he gets up from a chair too quickly.

'I will have to consult...'

'No, it is you I must deal with, Philip. If you promise me a share of the leases, I will get you the credit.' Fugger's smile is broad and encouraging. Filippo cannot think what to do. Can he make such an undertaking? Does he have the authority? He finds himself nodding.

'I promise,' Filippo says, quietly.

'Very good. So. My auditor and attorney have accompanied me here, and I will send them to check the books and draw up the bond, let us say at the end of the week, before the wedding ceremony, yes?' Herr Fugger gathers his sleeves, ready to leave. 'If they are satisfied, then the deal will be done, yes? Very good.'

He waits for Filippo to show him out.

'Something else, Herr Factor?' he asks.

Filippo braces himself.

'Herr Fugger,' he says. 'I need a more immediate...favour.'

The banker is intrigued by this sudden assertiveness.

'Fifty one scudi,' Filippo says, in a low voice. Despite his efforts to use a tone that makes the sum sound insignificant, its vastness looms over them like a great wave that will engulf the entire palace. 'By tomorrow.'

The banker leans away from Filippo, and smiles at him. Then he slowly shakes his head.

'Ah, I had wondered if this was coming,' he says. 'The oil of the angels, do you Ferrarese not call it? Seifentagl, a smearing of tallow to smooth the way?' Fugger produces the palm of one hand, and strokes it with the fingers of the other, in a gesture that is oddly and disturbingly lewd.

'No, no.' Filippo blushes, horrified by the accusation.

'But so much—and such a strange number, so precise, no?' Herr Fugger says. 'You surprise me. What is it for?'

'Certain...contingencies.'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘And why not your own currency, the lire marchesana?’

Filippo cannot think of an answer.

‘Will not a letter of credit suffice?’ the banker asks.

‘It needs to be in specie, honore.’

‘You want fifty one gold scudi, by tomorrow?’ Herr Fugger maintains his amused humour. ‘Are you perhaps being blackmailed or something?’

‘Please, Herr Fugger.’

The banker glances back at the books, then at Filippo.

‘If you wish,’ he says, at last, with an almost casual shrug. ‘You may have your advance.’

Filippo bows his head, if only to disguise the flush of relief coursing through his cheeks.

‘There is, of course, no interest on the principal.’

‘Of course - ’

‘We are not usurers like the Jews. But there is an administrative fee.’

‘Yes, honore.’

‘Finding such a sum at short notice has certain costs attached.’

‘I quite understand, honore.’

‘So, a double tithe?’

‘What?’

‘A double tithe.’

Filippo cannot stop himself from balking. ‘A fifth?’

‘I think that is reasonable.’

Well, at least such a rate means any entitlement of an explanation is foregone. Filippo nods his agreement.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Send your man around to my lodgings tomorrow,’ Fugger says. ‘A pouch and indenture will be ready.’

DAY SIX

Monday, 5th March, 1579

‘Donna Molza ready for her cue?’

Tarquinia hears Contessa Machiavella’s mocking tone, understands what she is supposed to do, yet cannot stop herself staring through the window. The fattore’s window is visible on the opposite side of the stable yard. The curtain is still drawn, as though he has chosen this day of all days, the day the ransom is due, to sleep.

‘Donna Molza?’ Leonora says.

Tarquinia turns her attention back to the score. The notes seem to swim across the staves like nymphs in water.

She glances across the stage. They are both looking at her: the Contessa Machiavella in her voluminous dress with a look of amused disdain, Leonora showing genuine concern.

‘Maestro Eremita expended a great deal of effort writing this motet,’ the countess points out, ‘and apparently has devoted the lead part to you, so perhaps you might want to essay a glissando or two? If you are not too distracted?’

‘I am afraid...’ Tarquinia gazes across the empty hall, a sense of apprehension overwhelming her. She finds herself stepping off the stage.

‘Donna Molza,’ the contessa calls, ‘where do you think you are going?’

‘I just need...a moment. I will return directly.’

The Angel of Ferrara

Just as Tarquinia approaches the door, Fiorini appears at it, flustered as always. They both come to an abrupt halt, staring at one another.

‘Ah, the fattore!’ the contessa declares. ‘Just the man. Come here, if you will.’

He looks at her, confused.

‘Signora?’

‘I want you to tell us where the cardinal, the duke and the Grand Duke will be sitting, for the concert on Friday.’

He hesitates on the threshold, glancing nervously between Tarquinia and the countess.

‘His highness the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Where will he be sitting on Friday, for our concert?’ the contessa prompts. ‘Wake up, man! Is the bumptious Florentine not the reason why the Concerto delle Donna is performing? Is that not why we are here in your glittering, gaudy new hall?’

The fattore, looking pale and tired, could be ill. With a sigh, he walks towards the stage’s apron, and comes to a halt. He shuffles back a little and to the side. ‘Here, signora, probably.’

‘And the cardinal?’ the contessa asks him. ‘Where will my lord Luigi be seated?’

The fattore shifts fractionally sideways.

‘So,’ the contessa continues, evidently enjoying moving him around like a chess piece, ‘his highness the duke there, next to his brother?’ She points. He obediently shifts a little further along.

‘Fattore?’ Tarquinia interrupts, unable to restrain herself any longer.

‘Donna Molza?’

‘Any...news?’

‘News?’ the countess asks, immediately alert.

‘Yes,’ the fattore blurts, ‘that is why I am here, in fact, contessa. For a word with Donna Molza.’

‘What about?’ the contessa asks, as though she is entitled to know.

Tarquinia looks to Fiorini, as she desperately tries to assemble an explanation, but her faculties are in pieces.

He rubs his eye and blinks to clear it.

‘Tarquinia?’ the contessa asks.

‘Relating to a horoscope lately cast by Donna Molza, contessa,’ the fattore says, with impressive presence of mind, ‘concerning some matters of his eminence, which need...interpretation.’

‘What matters?’

‘He is not at liberty to say,’ Tarquinia snaps.

‘Can it not wait until - ’ Leonora pleads.

‘It will not take long,’ Tarquinia interrupts, leading the fattore out of the hall.

They reach vestibule and he closes the door. He glances down the staircase to see the court below is deserted. Breathing heavily, he removes a purse from his pocket and offers it to her. She takes it and nearly drops it with the weight. She has never held such a quantity of coin in her hand.

‘The ransom money,’ he whispers.

The sense of relief is overwhelming.

‘There are only a few hours left. How do you intend the delivery?’ she asks.

He leans away, a look of almost amused surprise on his careworn face. ‘Me?’

‘Well you don’t think...’

He apparently does. ‘His eminence’s household cannot be associated with this transaction, you know that,’ he says firmly. ‘You have to deal with it.’

He reaches into his pocket and retrieves the ransom note.

‘You expect me to go to the kidnappers?’ she says, gazing at it.

With unusual boldness, he takes her free hand and presses the note into it. She watches him do it as though powerless to control her own limbs.

‘Take it to the colletore,’ he says. ‘You mentioned you had approached him, and he will have dealt with such affairs in the past, I have no doubt - ’

‘Carry a purse with fifty scudi into the Borgo di Sotto?’

‘Shush, madama, please. Keep your voice down.’

He glances nervously at the door.

He leans into her.

‘Fifty one,’ he mutters.

‘What?’

‘I managed to secure the fifty demanded by the boy’s kidnappers, plus one to secure the colletore’s cooperation. It should be more than enough. He will be desperate by now.’

‘Whether it is fifty or fifty one is hardly the issue,’ she hisses. ‘I cannot carry a sum like this in the streets.’

But he just backs away, shrugging an apology, and before she can stop him, scampers like a frightened hare down the steps into the court, leaving her holding the purse and the note and being called back into the hall by the impatient contessa.

§

Tarquinia’s efforts at disguise have only made her more exposed. The long cloak and hood were a mistake. The pouch hanging from her petticoat belt swings like the clapper of a bell beneath her skirts as she walks down the Via delle Volte, heading east for the Borgo di Sotto—to the ends of the earth as far as she is concerned, a place that exists for her only as a stew of taverns, brothels and slums.

Crossing the Via San Pietro is like plunging into another realm, one in a state of strange suspension. An ominous quiet prevails. The streets and alleys are silent. There is no traffic or trade. No anvils ring, no hawkers call. The streets are covered in grass and weeds. A goat grazes a derelict plot—the only sign of life. A repulsive miasma thickens the air, the stink of blighted vegetables and sewage, mixed with the noxious fumes from the tannery beyond the walls. Windows and doorways are dark and

empty, but surely eyes are watchful somewhere deep in these ramshackle hovels, behind fluttering curtains of rotting sackcloth.

She could be lost, but she knows that if she heads towards the east, drawn into the intensifying tannery stench, she must be headed in the right direction. She comes to a turning into a wider thoroughfare. The buildings are of batter quality. This must surely be the Via Rotta.

In one direction, a group of men cluster near a well. They glance up at her. She turns to look in the other direction, and sees the sign of the crow, waving, beckoning. She looks back towards the man, but they have disappeared.

She steps out into the street and heads towards the sign. She sees a man squatting on the threshold, his back to the doors, like a beggar. As she gets closer, she can see his breeches are around his thighs and his face is distorted by a terrible grimace. He emits a series of grunts, his knees trembling. He gets to his feet, pulling up his breeches, and as he walks off she can see what he has left behind on the doorstep, steaming in the morning sunshine.

The approach towards the colletore's property is slow and cautious. The walls are covered with splashes of blood and other liquid excrements. The leaded panes of the window in the upper storey room are smashed. One of the stable doors hangs open off its hinge.

Making a nosegay of her hand, she walks over towards the doorway, and, at the risk of revealing the purse, lifts her skirt so she can step over the heaps and smears of excrement covering the threshold.

The stable appears to be empty, and stripped of its fittings. At the top of steps lining the far wall, the trapdoor to his chamber has been left open.

She uncovers her mouth to call quietly: 'Colletore?' The smell is so noisome she reels around, to retch.

Fighting the revulsion, she walks over to the steps and climbs up. She emerges into a spacious room. It is empty. There are no furnishings or hangings—nothing. All that remains is shattered glass beneath the window, and the shadow of a rug on the floorboards.

The Angel of Ferrara

She returns to the street. On the opposite side of the road, a man stands in the portico of the church, looking straight at her. He is so still, he could be a piece of the masonry, and could have been there all the time. He wears a long, crumpled cassock with stains across the chest.

‘Donna Molza?’

The sound of the cleric calling out her name seems to echo across the contrada.

She walks quickly over to him.

‘Do you know what happened?’ she asks, nodding towards the colletore’s ransacked property.

His face, the shape of an inflated bladder, has an impudent smile stitched across it. He is a slovenly figure, unkempt and unshaven, tufts of pale ginger hair straggling across his scalp. He is wearing church vestments, but stained with food, and frayed at the cuffs and around the neck.

She glances down at his feet. ‘Are you wearing...?’ Elaborately-tooled, black leather toes stick out from beneath the tattered hem of his cassock. ‘Are those the colletore’s boots?’

The man glances down at them, and lifts one foot so she can get a better look. ‘I gave him sanctuary,’ he explains, proudly. ‘When he was attacked by his enemies.’

‘What enemies?’

‘Take your pick. The city is full of them. People who owed him, people he filched in front of their family and friends.’

‘May I see him?’ she asks.

‘Why?’ the man asks.

The insolence takes her by surprise. ‘I have some...private business.’

In the corner of her eye, she sees movement in nearby alleyway. She glances around, but cannot see anyone.

‘Oh, don’t concern yourself, madama,’ he says, noticing. ‘You are safe with the sagristano.’

The Angel of Ferrara

‘You are the sexton?’ she asks in disbelief.

He smiles, showing a row of front teeth filed down to the gums. ‘You could take refuge in my private chamber, up there.’ He points to the round window above the portico.

‘May I see him?’ she repeats.

He shakes his head, a look of exaggerated regret. ‘He is not here.’

‘But...you said you gave him sanctuary.’

‘He left, last night.’

‘Do you know where he has gone?’

The sexton nods. She waits for him to say, but he remains mute.

‘Will you tell me, sagristano, please?’ she asks. The urge to scream at him or slap him is overwhelming. The look in two tiny eyes between red, inflamed lids suggests this is what excites him.

‘Surely a lady of your beauty and accomplishments cannot owe him anything—money or otherwise.’

He lifts his bushy eyebrows, the hairs of which are so long they tangle with his fringe. A waft of his smell, like damp, rotting biscuits, engulfs her as he steps closer and leans in.

‘Sing for me,’ he whispers.

She backs away. The sexton nods encouragingly. She looks around. A sullen boy can be seen at the corner of an alley, watching them.

‘If you knew whose business this concerned,’ she says through her teeth, ‘you would not be behaving as you are.’

‘Whose business?’ he asks.

‘The business of an official of the church.’

He tilts his head, feigning a look of innocent curiosity, inviting her to be more specific.

The Angel of Ferrara

'I cannot say,' she admits.

He smiles.

'So, if you would, Donna Molza. A few notes,' he says.

Time is short. If a few notes are needed to give her the chance to deliver the ransom before it is too late, so be it. A line of Eremita's madrigal will suffice, where the expression is soft and the pitch low.

She sings the phrase. He smiles, apparently delighted.

She stops in the midst of a phrase.

'You may hear the rest once I have seen him,' she says.

The wretch nods appreciatively. 'He has gone to lie with his mother,' he says.

'What?'

He lets the image dwell for a moment.

'She murdered herself, the old whore. While she was with the nuns of Il Convertite. So there's no Christian plot that would have her.'

§

Tarquinia pushes at the gate, and it swings open. The lock has been bent, perhaps forced.

She enters the Jewish cemetery, and finds herself in a pleasant, quiet glade planted with yews and cedars. Lines of modest graves are arranged in neat rows across a lawn. The graves bear familiar names, ancient lineages that have been in Ferrara going back to the time of Duke Ercole and even Leonello. She comes to a series of more recent burials. The plinths and footstones have lines of smooth pebbles arranged along the side, perhaps a custom of mourners, to mark their visit.

Up ahead, under the canopy of a large, heavy yew, a row of imposing mausolea like miniature temples backs onto the cemetery wall. She walks along the row, peering through heavy gates of elaborate ironwork.

At the end of the row, a tuft of hair can be seen poking through the scrolled metalwork at the bottom of one of the gates. He is lying on the mausoleum floor.

Droplets of sunshine shimmering through the branches of the tree overhead and the ironwork of the gate spray across his head and shoulders. She can see the side of his face, a graze where the cheekbone protrudes.

‘Colletore?’ she calls softly.

In a spasm of movement, he jerks up and twists round to see her.

‘Colletore,’ she repeats. He is breathing heavily, blinking in the sunshine.

He struggles to his feet, wincing and grunting as he moves; the smooth coordination of his limbs seems to have deserted him.

He is in a sorry state, his face covered in dirt and grazes. The flesh around his right eye is the colour of a storm cloud. He is wearing a ragged, filthy coat, a hole in the worn elbow revealing a torn shirt beneath. What must be the sexton’s scuffed old shoes are on his feet.

‘What did they do to you?’ she asks.

He blinks, and rubs his eye, the pain making him grunt. ‘Nothing,’ he says.

‘Nothing? Look at you.’

He does not want her to look at him. He swings back the gate, and pushes past her, walking down the mausoleum steps and onto the lawn. He walks over to a half barrel set beneath the tree to water the plants, and washes his face. He stands with his back to her, letting the sun dry his face.

She walks over.

‘I understand your mother is buried here,’ she says. She looks around, as though he might indicate where.

‘What do you want?’ he asks.

‘I want you to make a collection,’ she says.

She pulls the note from her pocket and holds it out. He glances at it.

She starts to unfold it. ‘It’s the ransom note, for Angelo. Do you want me to...?’ She is not sure how to pose the question tactfully.

He snatches it from her. 'I can read,' he snaps.

'They have given us very little time,' she says, as he gazes at it. It shakes in his hand, perhaps because of the breeze, or the effects of his injuries. She notices a large cut just beneath his hair line and above his head, which beads with scabbed blood. 'They say they will bring him, bring Angelo to the camarine bog, near the Belvedere, this evening, while the fireworks celebrating the wedding are underway.'

She falls quiet, waiting while he studies it.

He looks up. 'Fifty scudi?'

She lifts her skirts to retrieve the purse. She tries to untie it, but her trembling fingers cannot free the tether. He reaches forward and helps, gently pulling at the knot with his long fingers, until it is free. He reels in the purse and cups it in his hand, obviously impressed by the weight. He teases it open, revealing a nest of gold coins. His eyes are back on hers, wide with amazement.

'Who'd you have sleep with to get your hands on this?'

She cannot stop herself from unleashing a slap across his cheek. Her fingers catch the wound on the side of his face. He reels back, a pitiable look of pain in his eyes.

She may have made an enemy of the one man who can save her child. 'Sorry,' she says, shaking her hands, as though she has no responsibility for them.

He hangs his head. 'No,' he mumbles. 'I shouldn't have said that, but I need to know where this money comes from. It's a huge sum. Enough for ten good horses.'

'I cannot say,' she replies. 'But it is not stolen.'

As he gazes at her, the yearning to explain is almost unbearable—the cardinal deserves it, he deserves that his involvement in this terrible predicament be known.

The colletore peers into the purse again, and uses a finger to stir the coins.

'There's one extra, for you,' she explains.

He starts to count, picking the coins out one at a time, whispering the numbers.

In the quiet of the cemetery, she can hear the distant sounds of the city going about its morning business. The breeze is gentle and the air smells sweet.

The Angel of Ferrara

He reaches the expected sum and drops the money back into the purse, saving one coin, which he puts in a pocket. He looks up at her.

‘What makes you think I won’t just run off with it?’ he asks.

‘Because, collettore, you are no more a thief than I am a whore,’ she says.

§

Filippo watches Donna Molza gaze out of the window, into the night.

She says something, but Filippo is too flustered by her presence, her proximity, to pay attention. He pours the wine he ordered up from the cellars into the jewelled goblet he had retrieved from the treasury. The smell is rich and powerful, almost enough to overcome Tarquinia’s perfume.

‘Madama?’ he says, proffering the drink with one hand, still holding the flagon in the other.

She ignores him.

He puts the cup down on the desk, near the upholstered chair he got one of the boys to bring over from the presence chamber.

He sits in his own seat, and watches her. She is so absorbed by whatever she sees through the window, he can inspect every part of her at leisure.

Then she turns.

‘Fattore?’

‘What?’ She has caught him by surprise. He closes his mouth, finding that he has left it hanging open.

‘You said something?’

She sits on the chair provided, and grabs a bolt of her hair falling over her neck, tugging gently, distractedly at it.

‘Would you like something else to drink, madama, a tisane?’ he asks, casting around for an appropriate gesture of hospitality. How does one entertain Ferrara’s most accomplished, beautiful singer in one’s private room?

'The kidnappers broke into my house, and took my papers,' she says, her eyes still elsewhere.

'Did they?' he says. It is relief she does not look at him, his cheeks surely being the colour of ripe tomatoes.

'I assume they were looking for other ways to ruin me.'

'What did they take?' he asks.

'My papers, my books, some of the rarer medicines I have, jewellery, including a precious necklace.'

That wretched bailiff Moiza evidently has further questions to answer.

'I am sorry to hear that,' Filippo says, trying to moderate his breathing. Perhaps she can smell his rank deceit.

She seems to have her eyes on his bookshelf, surveying the spines.

A loud bang makes Filippo jump.

'The wedding fireworks,' he blurts, to cover his embarrassment. He gets up and goes to stand at the corner of the desk, near her chair, and they both look through the window. A plume of white light spurts from the roof of the distant castello into the sky, blanking out the stars and replacing them with its own, which scatter high into the heavens, like a wonderful fountain. Perhaps he can hear the appreciation of the crowd in the piazza, a collective gasp of awe. It seems to be inexhaustible, this fountain. The pattern of its flames glows and fans out like the feathers of a luminous angel, rising from the castello tower. How does the duke's bombardier achieve such miraculous effects?

§

Even a furlong from where they are lit, the fireworks fill the night sky, their bangs and crackles reaching his ears after the flares and sparks have collapsed back to earth.

Jacomo steps onto the abandoned jetty that extends over the camarine bog. The river, which in years past was deep enough to bring boats to the pier even in summer, has retreated into the far distance, the dry winter and lack of dredging reducing it to

little more than a stream near the opposite bank, leaving an expanse of mud pockmarked with hummocks and clusters of flotsam. An old boat is marooned out in the middle of the bog, near where a creeping tendril of the river runs.

Upstream, he can see the lights of the duke's retreat on Belvedere Island through the trees of the surrounding park.

A cloud of smoke drifts down the river and rinses through the vegetation on the bank. The smell of cordite and burning timber mixes with the metallic odour of the mire.

The bells of the nearby monastery of San Giacomo ring compline—the time of the rendezvous. A mouse or vole can be heard scurrying through the grass. A wind annoys the trees, carrying spits of rain. Bayardo, restless from having been stabled in strange surroundings the past two nights, can be heard whinnying beyond the trees where he tethered him.

Jacomo turns and surveys the clearing and the venue for the handover: the locations where the money is buried and the stash of arms lying in the grass at his fallback position. He checks that the sword hanging from his hip slips smoothly from its sheath, and rehearses the movement that releases the dagger tied to his leg.

A plopping noise distracts him, and he can see in the gleam of a dying firework bubbles of mud surfacing not far from the side of the jetty, almost as though some monster lurking deep in the mire has come alive and is about to surface.

After a while, a more intense light can be seen, floating in midst of the copse downriver of the clearing—a pitch torch. Shadows of tree trunks move across the grass like the spokes of a turning cartwheel as three figures can be seen wading through the undergrowth, circling the jetty.

§

Donna Molza has returned to her seat, and seems lost in her own thoughts. She could be waiting for him to say something, but Filippo has nothing to say, nothing that would not sound crass, or rude, or irritating, or...

'Why here?' she suddenly asks, her eyes lifting to his.

‘Madama?’

‘I could have waited in my own house for the news. Once the boy is returned to Rossi by the collettore, the mason could have come to me. Why insist on him coming here?’

‘I...’ But he cannot think of how to express himself.

‘Concerns about the money, perhaps? Wanting to know he hasn’t run off with it?’

Her assessment of his nasty, distrustful motives is shrewd and damning. It intensifies the discomfort.

‘I just wanted, you see, to be...to be sure, for myself, not myself but as the agent of his eminence’s...his eminence’s interests -’

‘Is that your main concern?’ she says. ‘Is that how your mind works?’

He turns back to the window, the feeling of despair at her scorn as hot as the huge flame that shoots up from the castello’s Lion Tower, casting light across the roofs. The explosion is followed by balls of red and orange fire mixed with dense black smoke, which rise up and burst high in the sky like bubbles, releasing showers of sparks that tip over the castello and presumably the spectators in the square below.

‘The roof is alight!’ he blurts.

She comes and stands next to him to watch.

There is an blast so powerful, he feels the warmth on his nose. The castello roof is now a conflagration, the trusses already visible, burning like kindling.

The silhouettes of the bombardiers can be seen moving frantically along the tower’s parapet, trying to control the blaze, or to escape it. It has started to rain. Filippo can hear the gentle, steady hiss.

Her closeness is both stifling yet exhilarating, like another source of heat. He tries to stop his body from swaying, as the slightest movement would make his arm touch hers, and the contact might make him burn up.

'It is a sign,' she says, in the distant voice of someone enchanted by a spell. He had not appreciated, he had been too bound up in his own feelings to realise those that must be flaring inside her.

'Madama? No, no...'

A further series of loud thumps and bangs erupt, filling the chamber, rattling his ears. The sound is confusing, until he realises that the noise is coming not only from exploding fireworks, but from his door.

'Fattore?' a voice calls.

They both swing around to look at the door, and then at each other.

'The colletore!' he whispers. 'You told him!'

She shakes her head. 'I said nothing.'

'Fattore!' The voice is a roar. Filippo rushes to the door to open it. The colletore stands there, soaked, pale and exhausted. His big dark eyes stare across Filippo's shoulder, at Donna Molza. Filippo turns to see her staring at him.

'What are you doing here, colletore?' Filippo asks, his voice high in his throat.

'Asking myself the same question,' the colletore says, walking stiffly into the room. He leans on the desk. The water seeping from his sleeve forms a pool which threatens to spread over Filippo's books. Filippo moves them aside.

'What happened? Where is the boy?' Donna Molza demands to know, pressing at the colletore's shoulder so he will stand up and face her. He does not respond.

'Sit in my chair,' Filippo suggests, trying to steer him towards it. The colletore drops into it, draping his arms over the sides, leaning his head against the seat-back. Water drips into the rug.

'Colletore?' She pushes Filippo aside and stands over him. 'Where is the boy?'

The colletore finds the strength to look at her. 'It was another boy,' comes the reply.

'What?'

He lurches forward and leans on the desk, his wet arms soaking the leather inlay.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘It was another boy, not Angelo. A decoy. Some ragazzo from the streets.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘How?’ He looks up at her. ‘Because his growth was stunted and he smelt of shit.’

She retreats to her chair, standing behind it, leaning against the back.

The collettore sniffs noisily and deeply, and wipes his nose on his sleeve. He turns to Filippo. ‘So it was you,’ he says.

‘Me?’

‘Supplied this.’ Bonaccioli pulls the purse containing the ransom from his pocket and drops it on the desk. It lands with a loud clatter.

The pouch sits there, sagging as it leaks water, the sight of it producing an eruption of pounding heartbeats.

The collettore sighs, and seems to deflate like the purse into the chair.

‘What happened?’ she asks softly.

He holds up two fingers. ‘Two kidnappers arrived, with this boy, dressed in a long black cloak like choristers wear - ’

‘A cassock.’

‘They had him hooded with a chain around his ankle, which they used to tie him to a tree.’

Filippo is leaning over the purse, trying inconspicuously to open it. The collettore glances at him.

‘Yes, count it,’ he snaps. The fattore recoils.

‘Did you recognise them, these kidnappers?’ she asks, unconcerned about the money, the vast sum lying on the desk.

Bonaccioli shakes his head. ‘The older one had a missing ear, scarring around the side of his head.’ He indicates by cupping a hand over one ear.

‘Scarring? Like...a convicted coiner?’

‘Yes.’ The collettore is alert to the sudden show of interest. ‘You know him?’

The Angel of Ferrara

Filippo pauses, wondering what to say. 'Tall?' he ventures.

Bonacciolli shakes his head. 'No, squat, like you.'

Sancto Novellino, the cardinal's gardener and slaughterer, perfectly described: a clipped ear, and Filippo's height.

'Then what happened?' Filippo asks, as smoothly as is possible.

The colletore looks at him, suspiciously, then turns back to Donna Molza.

'The older one escaped,' he continues, 'the other, a scrawny rogue, I killed—dumped his body in the camarine.' He says it as though talking of a rabbit.

The room is quiet for a moment, the only sounds the gentle fall of rain and the muffled thud of the horses moving around in the stalls beneath. Glancing through the window, Filippo can see the fire on the castello roof has begun to abate.

'And the boy? The...' She casts around for the right word. '...decoy—what happened to him?'

The colletore looks down at the desk, his head hanging between his shoulders.

'He may know something about Angelo,' she points out.

Bonacciolli does not respond.

'Colletore?'

He looks up, and shrugs.

'He jumped me,' he admits.

'What?'

'As soon as I had released him from his tether, the ungrateful little bastard punched me in the balls and ran off.'

Bonacciolli gives a satirical smile, as though imagining the amusement his humiliation has aroused.

'He even took my horse, my Bayardo—I save him from the hands of those bastards who attacked me, and he is stolen by a fucking ragazzo.' Filippo glances at Donna Molza, who does not so much as flinch at the colletore's obscenity.

The Angel of Ferrara

Bonaccioli spots Donna Molza's goblet of wine on the corner of the desk, and snatches it. He drains it.

Filippo tugs on his sleeve.

'You haven't said,' he reminds him.

'What?' the colletore snaps.

'What brought you here.'

The colletore lets out a snort, then throws a wary glance at Donna Molza.

'Emilio Rossi,' he says.

'He told you?' Filippo asks. 'The boy's father?'

The colletore picks at a piece of loose leather on the edge of the desk. 'He had been in the trees, it turned out, watching the kidnappers—there all the time.'

'And?'

'He made a grab for the target, before realising he was a decoy. He got a blade in the face for his efforts, from the scrawny one, the kidnapper I killed.'

Filippo finds he has put his hands on his head.

He quaffs more of the drink and wipes his lips. 'I tried to carry him back, but he was dead before I reached the bridge. I had to leave him in bushes near the milestone on the Via Finale. Just before he gave up the ghost, he told me to come here, the cardinal's palazzo, where you and...' He nods at Donna Molza. 'You and her would be waiting for news.' He glances at Filippo. 'You might want to send a cart tomorrow, *fattore*; pick up his corpse.'

The rain is falling more heavily now, bringing a chill into the room.

'So, *fattore*,' the colletore says, staring into the goblet, fingering the rim. 'A prince's ransom, the duke's singer and the cardinal's factor, somehow all bound up with a mason's son.' He looks up. 'You're a man of numbers. Make it add up.'

The challenge takes Filippo by surprise. 'The wedding, the blessing, at the cathedral on Sunday,' he says, struggling to give his improvisation a smooth delivery. 'The choir is

under the cardinal's patronage and will be performing for his brother the duke. Angelo is one of the sopranos—one of the best, is that not right, madama?’

But Donna Molza is in no state to offer support. She has sat down and stares at her lap. She could be weeping, but too proud to show it.

‘He had...has a solo part,’ Filippo continues, ‘and Maestro Eremita, the choir’s master, was insistent: the performance would not be as impressive without this boy’s voice, and it would reflect badly not only on his eminence, but this city - ’

‘Oh, Mother of Christ,’ she shouts. ‘Stop gabbling, fattore. He knows the boy is my son.’

She looks at the colletore, as if preparing to say more.

‘Donna Molza!’ Filippo exclaims.

‘What, fattore? What?’ she says.

They stare at one another for a moment, a rare moment when she actually looks at Filippo as if he is really there.

‘Night watch,’ comes a voice. The words smash into Filippo’s thoughts like a falling tree. They all turn to the door. Filippo holds up his hand to signal quiet. For a few moments, they are motionless.

‘Fattore? Wake up!’ Fredo calls, rattling the door.

Filippo gestures to Donna Molza and the colletore to hide in a dark corner of the chamber, behind the mattress. Filippo tries to cover the noise of their movements with a series of spluttering coughs.

‘What are you doing disturbing me at this hour, Fredo?’ he calls in a croaky voice—a poor attempt to sound like he has just awoken.

‘Asking myself the same question, fattore.’

Filippo inches the door open. Fredo stands there, his cape splattered with rain.

‘The ferryman. Says it was on your instruction to report as soon as he found anything,’ the gatekeeper tells him.

‘Report what?’ he asks.

‘A dead boy like you told him to look for, washed up on the riverside down beyond the San Giorgio Bridge.’

§

She stands in the low tunnel behind the palazzo’s midden. He is behind her. Her fingers are so cold, it feels like her bare bones are sticking through the fingertips as they wrestle with the freezing metal.

‘Let me,’ the colletore says, reaching across her.

She shoulders him away, and works the latch.

‘How come you know this way in?’ she hears him ask. She ignores the question.

Eventually, the latch gives, and she pushes the door. She passes through the tunnel beneath the wall, emerging through an opening at the rear of the palazzo, hidden behind a bush. She pushes through the branches and until she is in the palace yard. A thickening curtain of rain surrounds her, lit by a lamp hanging from the gate.

He faces her for a moment, a black hole in the glistening downpour, then he turns.

‘No you don’t,’ she shouts, grabbing his jacket before he can run off. ‘You take me.’

‘It is too dangerous.’ He pulls at his jacket to free himself. ‘The gates are all locked. You won’t be able to get out. Go home. I will tell you what I find.’

She manages to resist his efforts to free himself.

Then she is nearly pulled off her feet as she is tugged into the darkness by his hand around her wrist. He pulls her along faster and faster, the wet hem of her cloak flapping around her shins. She lifts her dress with her free hand, struggling to stop the heavy brocade becoming tangled with her knees. A sharp wind drives the rain through the seams and buttonholes of her bodice, through the camisole beneath and onto her skin like icy fingers. The weight and cold are unbearable. But she will not let him go.

She collides into his shoulder. He has come to a sudden halt and let go of her. He shifts away and her foot hits the curb of a paving stone, forcing her to lurch forward to recover her balance.

The Angel of Ferrara

Where is he? She looks around for a lantern, a point of light to move towards, but none is visible. The darkness is total in every direction. She reaches out, and her knuckles collide with a wall.

‘Bonaccioli!’ she yells. The driving rain sprays into her eyes.

He has gone, abandoned her in this abyss. Her legs weaken under the weight of her wet dress and despair at her predicament. Then she is jerked violently forward. Her wrist has been grabbed again, and they are running once more, hurtling into the dark, her feet plunging into puddles and potholes, sliding on cobbles. What game is he playing? Is it even him? A gutter can be heard spewing nearby. A stand of trees whipped by the wind roars like a vast crowd. She wonders if she can sense the hulk of the castello somewhere to her side.

They veer off to the right, perhaps towards the south. She nearly slips, but manages to keep her balance. His grip tightens, crushing her bones.

They seem to be in the shelter of a long wall, and the pace slackens a little. Another abrupt turn, and they reach a narrow alleyway, leading into a tunnel. She runs her fingertips along the rough brickwork of the wall to touch the world that reels around them. The squelching sound of their steps dances around the low vault. He slows, perhaps to avoid an obstacle. She can smell the dampness of the colletore’s coat, and once or twice finds her feet hitting his heels.

Ahead, the tunnel’s exit becomes visible, a beam of moonlight cast on bricks with a sheen of damp. The colletore’s shoulders are silhouetted against the glow, his round head almost perfectly eclipsing the moon.

Her foot drops into a deep puddle and she lurches forward. She plunges onto her knees, one of them jarring as it strikes the edge of a brick or sharp cobble, the heel of her hand grazing as it scrapes across some grit. The cold water of a deep puddle soaks through her cloak and skirt, making them even heavier, her body even colder.

‘Wait!’ she calls.

Hands reach beneath her arms, and she finds herself being lifted roughly to her feet. He pulls her arm over his shoulder to lift the weight off her legs, and carries her out of the tunnel and into a patch of boggy grass. He eases her arm free, and she

stands. The pain leaps up her leg, but she manages to stop herself from falling. She reaches down to feel the bones in her ankle.

The rain has stopped. The trees and roofs drip. His breath and clothes steam with the heat of his exertion.

He walks ahead, towards a small gate. He turns.

‘Can you walk?’ he asks. She limps towards him, the pain easing a little with each step. He proceeds down a path next to a series of vegetable gardens, and she follows. The booms used to hoist water from the wells are like lines of gallows against a clearing sky.

The peak of the Montagnola di San Giorgio is just visible above the roofs of warehouses. They skirt the mound, until they reach a muddy excavation next to the city wall. The wooden crutches of an enormous scaffold become visible, where the city wall has collapsed.

The colletore is nimble up the side. She follows as quickly as she can, struggling across the slippery beams, her ankle jabbing with pain, her frozen fingers aching viciously, the hem of her dress a chain around her shins.

She reaches the top, stopping to get her breath. Not far from the scaffold, the original wall continues to one of its massive ramparts that jut out into the park. The river passes near it, a ribbon of grey silk winding into the distance, stroked by moonlight breaking between speeding clouds. Somewhere along the strip of dark mud that trims the water lies the body that could be Angelo’s.

He has already started the descent to the parkland below. She follows, and wades after him through long, wet grass around the soaring bulwark. Just one light is visible above the city gate. The guard’s booth is empty.

They cross the San Giorgio bridge and reach a crossroads. A speck of light can be seen coming from the monastery ahead. A milestone points south to Bologna, and east to Venice. They head for Venice.

The road drops down until it is at the level of the river.

The Angel of Ferrara

The cardinal's ferryman stands along the way, watching them approach. She holds back, fearful of being recognised. She watches as the colletore walks up to him. The ferryman nods, and points to somewhere beyond another rise in the road. The colletore runs off in that direction, without even glancing back at her. The ferryman remains standing in the road, staring at her.

She retreats to the side of the road, where bushes will obscure his view, but he continues to gape. The colletore has long disappeared over the crest of the hill.

She is trapped and becoming frantic, standing on her toes, looking over the bushes on the opposite side of the road for signs of a way through, cursing the colletore for leaving her in the lurch. When she looks back in the direction of the ferryman, he has gone.

She sprints along the road, passing the jetty where just eight days before she had waited with the welcoming party to receive the duchess off the ceremonial barge that had brought her from Mantua for the wedding.

The road curves, following the river's course, then rises gently to another crest. She slows, and listens. The sound of rustling draws her attention to a stand of reeds. She plunges down the bank, and finds, as she enters the reeds, her feet becoming clogged in the mud. She leaves her silk slippers behind.

As the reeds begin to thin, she stoops and creeps forward slowly. Ahead, the colletore is crouching at the edge of the reed bed.

She comes up beside him. He points to a shape moving along the shoreline, the silhouette of a short, bulky man with a bald or shaven head. At the same time, torches appear on the San Giorgio Bridge, further upstream.

The man with the shaven head sees the torches, and scurries over to the river.

The colletore's lips are close to her ear. 'The kidnapper,' he whispers softly.

The man starts reeling in a line. A boat bobbing in the middle of the river is drawn towards him. He wades into the water to meet it, and climbs in. He frees the line and starts to put the oars into the rowlocks, but the strong current carries him swiftly downstream and out of sight.

The Angel of Ferrara

She can wait no longer, and runs out onto the strand. She can hear the colletore run after her. The mud has a sour smell; the pebbles are sharp under her bare feet.

She hardly dares glance at the objects scattered around—the branch of a tree, a section of a boat, a rotting tangle of weeds.

The boy's body is by the water's edge. He is lying on his front, face down in the mud. He wears a stained smock, which has ridden up over his naked buttocks. The colletore passes her, slowing as he approaches the corpse. She finds herself holding back.

He squats down, and rolls the body over. The head comes to a rest facing away from her, as though the corpse could no more bear to look at her than she at it.

'You coming to look, then?' he calls in a whisper.

From where she stands, she can see that the hair is not his—a different length, a different quality—long, lanky and straight, rather than Angelo's thicket of unruly curls.

'It's not him,' she says.

But he is not listening. He stands, gazing down at the body. Even in the dim moonlight, she can see the colletore's expression is one of shock.

'His privates,' he says. 'They've been cut off.'

Voices can now be heard coming from the road.

He picks up an object from the sand—what looks like a small wooden disk. He examines it.

A dog's bark prompts him to look up.

'Unless you want to be seen here, time you left,' he says. The glow of torches breeches the top of the reeds. 'The podestà.'

She runs barefoot down the riverbank, towards the city.

DAY SEVEN

Tuesday, 6th March, 1579

Careful, quiet steps bring Jacomo to the outflow of a wide drain. Mud and sewage, run-off from the previous night's rainfall, trickles into the cavernous chamber.

He peers in. High above, pigeons flutter, fighting each other for perches in the vaulted brickwork, around a small, jagged hole in the funnelled ceiling.

A hacking cough comes from the chamber's gloomy recesses, where huddles of shifting bodies sleep on the floor. A soft, warm breath of air smelling of shit and sweat wafts by, down the throat of the sewer.

Jacomo scrapes a flint, using his body to shield the cloud of sparks. The rushlight leaps into flame as he touches it with the glowing tinder. Moving quickly, he leaps into the chamber and waves the torch.

Light bouncing off a large cesspool flares across the chamber walls. Rats and roosting pigeons scatter. The boys, lying in tangled heaps on the rotting wooden racks, awake and stare blearily and confused into the light. Some are too weak to move, others yell to alert their friends. They jump to the floor, and start running around the edge of the chamber, scurrying for shadows, squeezing into nooks and the deep cavities where munitions had once been stored.

Jacomo spots his target, trying to hide in a wide crack running up the sloping wall, masonry crumbling as his efforts shift loose bricks. He runs over and grabs him. The boy screams and bites.

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Jacomo throws him to the ground, turns him onto his stomach, and holding him down with a knee, pulls a rope from his pocket. In a swift, practiced move, the boy's wrists and legs are bound. He rolls the boy over.

'I will kill you,' Jacomo says, and the boy duly starts to scream, so his mouth can be stuffed with a cloth.

Jacomo lifts the boy and slings his thrashing body over a shoulder. Seeing the intruder has caught his prey, other boys emerge from their bolt-holes, and watch as Jacomo carries his writhing captive out of the chamber and into the drain. None of them try to help their kidnapped brother. There is no hope of fellowship in this rat hole.

Jacomo heads up the sewer until he reaches rungs leading up to the manhole. He awkwardly shoves the boy through the circle of sunlight, and surfaces behind him into the courtyard. He slides the stone cover back over the hole and drags the boy over to one side of the yard, leaning him up against a pile of rubble. The boy stares at him in fury, snot bursting from his nostrils. Pulling the cloth out of the boy's mouth is like releasing the stopper from a bottle of screams and shrieks. They pour out, and bounce around the courtyard's collapsing roofs and crumbling walls.

A slap quietens him.

'Annibale, right?'

The boy stares back. 'How come you know where I was?' he asks in amazement.

'My horse. What have you done with him?'

The boy starts to breathe heavily, his chest rising and falling like a blacksmith's bellows, his eyes as round as marbles.

'What horse?' he says.

Jacomo slaps him again. He yelps.

'You know what the podestà does with horse-thieves?'

Annibale nods vigorously.

'So, where is he?' he repeats.

'I didn't steal it!'

'Him.'

'What?'

'He's a stallion.'

'Him, then, shit, I didn't take him. That other one did, the lopped one, he took him, on my life, may rooks peck my eyes and dogs chew my balls.'

'Believe me, it won't be that gentle on you if you don't tell me.'

'I swear!'

Jacomo puts a hand round the boy's throat and begins to squeeze.

'I swear!' the boy gurgles. 'I never been on a horse!'

Jacomo releases him and steps back, giving the boy a chance to recover. He takes a piece of candied peel from his pocket and bites some off.

'Tell me about the kidnapper, then,' he says, chewing noisily. The boy watches.

'What's that?' he asks, almost in a whisper.

Jacomo takes the bag from his pocket and opens it up, showing the contents to the boy, who gapes at the golden slices. He puts the bag back in his pocket. 'It's a treat for the horse. And me.'

'You feed that to a horse?'

'Tell me about the kidnappers.'

'There were two of them,' says the quivering snipe, as Jacomo takes the bag out again, and looks into it to select the next piece of peel.

'How come they had you?' he asks.

'We were in the Mutina - '

'We?'

'Salvatore. My friend. From the Ca' di Dio.'

'You from there too, the orphanage?'

'We'd both got out,' he says.

Jacomo nods—an impressive achievement.

'What he look like?' Jacomo asks. 'Your friend?'

'Can't I have some?' He is staring at the bag.

'I found a corpse yesterday, by the river. Boy, your age. The cock and balls had been sliced off.' Jacomo feeds himself another slice, and chews for a few moments.

Annibale's gaze shifts from the bag to Jacomo.

'So, what he look like?' he asks again.

'Red hair,' the boy says, quietly.

Jacomo chews for a little longer.

'Not him then,' he says. He breaks off some peel and feeds it to the boy. While the boy eats it hungrily, he squats down and loosens the rope.

'He has a mother,' Annibale says, stretching his legs and feeling his ankles. One still has the scars where his kidnappers had tied the chain around it.

'Salvatore? You said he was at the Ca' di Dio.'

'She's a whore at Il Gambaro.' Annibale tries to dip a hand into the bag, but Jacomo snatches it just out of reach. Annibale leans over further, and Jacomo relents, letting him dip his hand in. He grabs a generous handful, and stuffs it in his mouth.

'You go there?' the boy mumbles through a clogged mouth.

'I was born there.' Jacomo watches the boy's bulging cheeks and contorting jaw. 'You know which whore was Salvatore's mother?'

'There's one that's thinner than the others.'

'Giovanna? Giovanna of Naples?'

Annibale shrugs.

They sit for a moment, looking at each other, as Annibale chews.

'So, the men that snatched you and this Salvatore in the Mutina, were they the ones who came to hand you over, the kidnappers I saw?' Jacomo asks.

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Annibale nods.

‘The lopped one was.’

‘What did they do with you, after they first took you?’

‘They bundled us somewhere.’

Jacomo clouts him round the ear.

‘Ow! Bastard! Stopping hitting me.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know where, you pig! They put bags over our heads.’

‘Somewhere in the city?’

Annibale shrugs.

‘You cross water?’

Annibale shakes his head.

Jacomo puts the bag back in his pocket, stands and sighs, his hands on his hips.

‘I heard roars, though,’ the boy adds, quickly.

‘Roars?’

‘Like lions.’

‘Close by?’

He nods.

‘But you did not go on a boat.’

‘No.’

‘Then what?’

Annibale opens his mouth wide, like a nestling waiting to be fed. Jacomo dips in his pocket and hands over the final piece of peel.

‘We were put in this dark room. A cellar. Made to stand in a line, and this other man was there - ’

'How many of you?'

'Twenty three.'

'You can't count.'

'More than the fingers on one hand.'

'And what did he look like?'

'Who?'

'This other man who was there.'

'Short, not much bigger than me, nasty, ugly face; sneered. Spoke like people up at the castello.'

'What did he do, the short, nasty, ugly man?'

The question seems to prompt a bad memory. Like groundwater coming up through a drain, Annibale's eyes well up.

Jacomo crouches down again, and puts a hand on the boy's shoulder. The tears are now pouring down his cheeks, leaving streaks in the dirt.

'Annibale, what did he make you do?'

Annibale sucks in a stuttered gasp of air.

'He made us sing.'

§

Filippo lies in his bed, wide awake, an image presented to his awareness as vivid as any painting on the palazzo walls.

In the centre of the picture is Tarquinia, on her knees on the riverside, mud fouling her skirts, her hair loose over her shoulders, as she weeps over a child's corpse. She cradles the boy's head in her arms, her fingers stroking cheeks as white and lifeless as Istrian stone. Filippo stands over her, ready to console her, to wipe away her tears. She yields as he gently extricates the child from her grasp. He whispers assurances to her that he will see to everything, to buying Bonaccioli's silence, to arranging the boy's burial at the Church of Sant'Anna.

And Tarquinia, duly grateful to Filippo for his discreet handling of the affair, and sharing in his grief for the loss of a loved one, will begin to notice him properly, see the true self she has helped expose. Perhaps...perhaps...she might even develop feelings for him.

But then a monster lumbers into the scene, throwing Filippo to one side: the kidnapper, the man with the lopped ear, scarring over the side of his face. He looms over a terrified Tarquinia, then turns to face Filippo. The cardinal's sometime gardener and slaughterman reveals himself: Sancto Novellino.

The sound of churns of milk and butter being rolled across the cobbles of the stable yard, the first of the morning deliveries, is calming. A book: a book will help settle the matter. He climbs out of bed and goes to examine his shelves. He finds *De Ludo Aleae*, Girolamo Cardano's volume on games of chance. After a long search, Filippo had obtained a copy of the precious manuscript from a Bolognese bookseller. The cardinal had wanted it, hoping to improve his fortunes at the gaming tables. 'Odds', that is what Cardano called them, the chances of a particular occurrence happening, such as the throw of a particular number of points on a die, those chances determined by knowing the 'circuit', the compass or number of possible occurrences that could take place. Thus risk becomes a matter of calculation.

Surely odds can be calculated for the kidnapper being Sancto. Filippo already feels more tranquil. This has become a numbers game.

The circuit of a die is usually six, so the odds of a particular number of points being thrown, if the die is not weighted, must be one in six.

What, then, is the circuit of men with lopped ears in Ferrara, from which might be derived the odds that the kidnapper Jacomo Bonaccioli described is his eminence's gardener and slaughterer?

Unfortunately, Filippo has no idea. Sancto is the only man he has ever met with an ear lopped in punishment of a crime, suggesting on the basis of personal perception that the identification is certain.

But there must be other men in the city who have lopped ears. It is a common enough punishment for petty offences.

Imagine an everyday circumstance, perhaps standing in the piazza, on a market day while it is busy with traffic, or perhaps on the way to the apothecary's, or the cathedral. Looking around, what can be seen that might usually be ignored? The halt and the blind with their hands held out, perhaps jostling pickpockets working the crowds, the Jews wearing their signums, the prostitutes with their yellow sashes, the pathetic petitioners gathered around the castle gate.

But any lopped ears? Perhaps they are usually hidden beneath cowls. How many cowls? Most of the beggars go around with cowls on their head. Sometimes you can see little more than a broken nose and a pair of desperate eyes.

Racking his memory, only a single occasion presents itself when he definitely saw a man with a lopped ear. He was working for Don Luigi's uncle: a man who shifted barrels for the cardinal's vintner at Tivoli. He was also missing several fingers.

But Filippo knows himself to be not particularly observant when it comes to such things. He rarely ventures out into streets beyond the precincts of the palazzo and the castello. He avoids, indeed detests, large public events. He rarely goes to taverns, or to the communes beyond the city walls, or, indeed, the poorer ones within them, the haunts of the criminal kind.

Thus direct experience, as so often, does not furnish the basis of a methodical answer to the question.

So it is back to the books.

He fetches from his shelves the records of the Company of the Blacks, a set of slim octavo volumes neatly bound, recording the number of criminals in the condemned cells noted by the company members. Each volume begins with a page bearing the title 'The Book of the Condemned' and the year to which it relates. There follows a list of company members, plus some words of dedication to their patron the cardinal, who is responsible, through Master-Secretary Mosto, for their appointment. This forematter introduces a table recording all executions that took place in the diocese during the year, set down, as articulated in the company's patent, by the company secretary. Each record comprises a brief description of the condemned's crimes, whether or not he elected to receive confession and absolution from a priest, a list of those members

who escorted the condemned to the place of execution, and a concluding statement that 'he paid', registering the fulfilment of the punishment. The pattern is reproduced across all the volumes, Filippo encountering only one exception: the entry relating to the notorious blasphemer Rinaldeschi, hanged from a balcony of the Torre di Rigobello for throwing dung at the face of the Madonna de' Ricci—in his case, the scandalised company secretary wrote, 'he paid in cash'.

Filippo tallies the number of mortal payments made each year for the period 1560 to 1577, the last year for which he has records. He notes that in 1570 and 1571, in the aftermath of the earthquake, the totals increase sharply, presumably because people were still sleeping on the streets for fear of their houses collapsing, which made both them and their property more exposed to robbery and looting. Excluding these extreme years, and using the method of averaging according to the mean, he calculates the number of executions per year in Ferrara to be of the order of 17.

So, what might be inferred from this information relating to the incidence of lopped ears in the city of Ferrara?

For each criminal act leading to execution, it might reasonably be surmised that the number resulting in the lesser punishment of mutilation (the most common form being mutilation of the ear) exceeds one. Therefore it might surely be conservatively assumed that twenty men or more a year have their ears lopped. As many of these men survive for more than a year following their punishment, more than twenty might live in the city at any one time—though of course it depends on the number who have died for other reasons.

Filippo rechecks his figures and his assumptions. The ratio of capital to lesser punishments—that must be as he has stated. It cannot be less. So, a die with at least twenty sides. It has been cast, and the chances that it is the face of Sancto that turns up are demonstrably small.

Another quarter bell strikes.

Filippo feels calmer and cooler now. He might sleep for a further few moments. He lies on the bed. At least one in twenty. The kidnapper cannot be Sancto. It is a ludicrous idea. One in twenty. Filippo needs some sleep. Orazio Urbani, the Florentine

resident, is due in, what, two hours? Urbani will no doubt be preparing to torment Filippo with boasts of the successes and prosperity of his employer and Don Luigi's deadly rival, his eminence, the execrable Don Ferdinando de'Medici, and Filippo must with strength and vigour rebuff his facile taunts.

So, he must sleep. Rest is vital.

One in twenty.

§

The ducal garden reeks of dank cinders and acrid smoke and the distant shouts and bangs of workmen repairing the charred timbers of the castello roof carry over the high wall. But Margherita is oblivious, she is so sickeningly elated.

She could be in Elysium, savouring the sweet smells of a summer meadow. 'It was the stars—your stars, Tarquinia!' she proclaims, pulling at the woody fronds of rosemary as she wanders by the herb garden and sniffing her fingers. Tarquinia follows. 'As you prophesied, the heat of Jupiter was upon him!'

'Highness - '

She ignores the interruption. 'As the castello was aflame, so was my lord! Full with passion, like a rage—and with such a natural vigour as you would expect of a man half his age. He could not wait! His blood was up. He was so eager, he could barely wait for the act to be complete!'

'Highness - '

The duchess comes to a sudden halt and swings around. She gestures to Tarquinia to come close and leans into her ear. 'His yard,' she whispers melodramatically, even though there is no one to overhear them. 'His yard—such a shape, and as thick as a ship's rope, I tell you, Tarquinia, like the ones they use on the bucentaur, to tie it to the pier, with the same quality of...roughness in the hand.' She giggles, then is suddenly very solemn. 'I can feel his seed in me, I can feel it grow. Ferrara is going to have its heir.'

'Highness.'

But the duchess continues to skip along the path, almost chasing away.

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Tarquinia rushes forward and touches her arm. The duchess swings around.

A puzzled frown buckles the smooth skin of her high forehead. 'What is it, Tarquinia? Are you not pleased for me.'

'Of course I am, highness, it is a wonderful blessing, but...'

The duchess is incredulous that there is anything in the cosmos that could taint this wonderful blessing. 'But what?'

Tarquinia has had to contain her passions like rats in a box. Now she allows a gap to open, in the hope of a controlled yet convincing release.

'I have lost a child,' she says.

The duchess at first flinches. Then she comes forward and wraps an arm around Tarquinia's shoulder. 'Oh, my darling Tarquinia. I did not realise, going on about my pregnancy when you remain childless. I did not know of your loss. That was tactless of me. Come, come.' She escorts her to a nearby bench, where they sit. 'Now,' she says, stroking Tarquinia's hair, delighting in having a chance to rehearse a motherly concern. 'You must tell me. When did this happen? When you were married?'

'A week ago,' Tarquinia says.

The duchess leans away, the hand that had been hovering around her cheek suspended in the air.

'What?'

'He is a chorister in the cardinal's choir.'

'Your son?'

'Oh no, highness, not my son—he's a mason's boy, Angelo. I am his tutor—but he means a great deal to me. I have helped raise him and paid for his education. So he is like a son.'

She looks confused.

'He has gone missing, and no one will do anything about it.'

The duchess's eyes are like those of a small dog, so wide, the lids have become invisible. Two, shiny orbs of childish terror glisten before Tarquinia.

‘That must be terrible for you,’ she says.

A lazy, furry bee strays close to the duchess’s head, and Tarquinia waves it away, taking in a deep breath to fortify herself.

‘If you would just talk to his highness...’

The duchess smiles.

‘Oh Tarquinia, you know I love you and would do anything for you.’ She gently cups Tarquinia’s cheeks and leans forward to plant a kiss on her forehead. ‘But my husband’s seed is inside me. Our city’s heir grows in my womb. I cannot possibly deal with anything so distressing, can I? It might disturb the generative processes.’

Having unleashed her feelings, Tarquinia cannot stop them surfacing in a sob of frustration.

The duchess stands. She looks down at her stomach, and uses her hands to stretch the fabric across her belly.

‘I must be happy,’ she announces. She gazes over the gardens, almost in a daze, then wanders off towards the gate, not looking back.

§

A child’s descant spills out of a window as Giacomo walks briskly down the Vicolo della Lupa. The voice is like a bell with a crack, breath strumming vocal cords roughened by angry screams or cries for help.

Walking through Il Gambaro’s open gate, Giacomo is engulfed by the rotten air, stagnant in the courtyard, thick with the smell of last night’s beer, vomit and sperm. Old Juiletta, squatting next to a stone, sorting the laundry, glances up at him as he ascends the stairs leading up to the gallery. She pulls a plaited bolt of cloth from the bucket, and proceeds to beat it against the stone, like a fisherman killing a fish. The spiteful crone is still watching him when he reaches to top of the stairs.

He walks briskly across the gallery’s boards, passing the closed doors of the whores’ chiusi, where they will be sleeping off the night’s labours. The nightingale lurks in a shadow at the far end. His singing falters as Giacomo approaches, holding a finger to his lips. The boy might be eight years old.

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Rhythmic grunting from behind the nearby door continues for a while, then slows to a halt.

'Boy!' a desperate, breathless voice calls, 'sing, damn you! I'm nearly there. I need you to sing!'

The boy resumes the song, but the colletore muffles him by covering his mouth.

'What's that fucking ragazzo up to?' The chiuso door is yanked open. The man stands there, stupid, fat and angry. The sheet he uses to cover himself fails to reach round his paunch. The purple tip of his swollen cock pokes out between the flaps.

The terrified boy runs off.

Jacomo turns to the man. 'Shouldn't you be at matins, padre?' he asks.

'What?' The man is confused. 'Wait your turn, you bumptious ruffian. I'm not done.'

He tries to slam the door, but Jacomo catches it.

'You are done.' Jacomo grabs the sheet, and yanks it off. The force pulls the man out of the room, and he falls heavily onto the gallery floor. Exposed flesh quivers with terror, as he sprawls on the deck, dressed in nothing but his slack stockings.

Jacomo watches him struggle to his feet. 'Monsignor will be wanting his vestments,' he calls into the room.

A tall, slender woman emerges, furiously tugging on a white shift.

'You?' she says.

'Giovanna - '

She rushes back into the room. Jacomo chases after her. He sees her reach for a bell under the bed. He grabs her arm to prevent her, and throws her onto the mattress. He straddles her, and puts a hand over her mouth to suffocate her screams.

'I am not here to collect.' He waits for her breathing to slow, the wildness to dim in her eyes. 'I am here about your boy.' She stops struggling. He eases his hand a little. 'Your missing boy.'

'My clothes!' the client implores through the door.

‘Get the fucker his threads,’ a woman yells from a neighbouring chiuso. ‘Trying to get some sleep.’

Jacomo climbs off Giovanna and fetches the bell from under the bed. He unhooks the small lead clapper, which he pockets. He places the bell on the table.

He scoops up the pile of clothes discarded on a chair next to the table and comes to the door.

‘And my money. I’ve paid!’ the man protests, the blood now gone from his face, his ardour reduced to a button.

‘Get it out of church funds,’ Jacomo advises, hurling the clothes over the balustrade.

‘I’m not a priest!’ the client squeals, watching in horror as his shirt and breeches sail fall into the courtyard below.

Jacomo slams the door on him and bolts it. He turns to Giovanna, who now stands next to the curtain screening off her toilet.

‘Your boy,’ he says.

‘What boy?’ She is breathing heavily.

A hand is behind her back, clinging to the curtain, as if it is all that holds her up. She works her angular jaw.

‘What do you want for him?’ she asks, quietly.

‘What? No! I haven’t got him, you stupid bitch. I am trying to find out what happened to him.’

‘Most think it’s you who took him,’ she mumbles.

‘Me?’

‘You’re this golem, aren’t you? The Jews’ child-snatcher? That’s what they’re saying.’

He rolls his eyes.

‘Well I’m not, right? And it has nothing to do with the Jews.’

'They drink Christian blood, don't they?'

'That's what we do, Giovanna, not them.'

The toes of a pair of men's shoes poke out from under the curtain. He picks them up. She is too slow to stop him.

'You give me those,' she snarls.

'These are his,' he guesses.

He holds them out of reach. She gives up, exhausted by it all, and slumps down on the bed. He sits next to her, examining the shoes. Small, well-worn, but cared for. He gently lays them on her lap. She looks down at them, her thumb tracing the shallow bowl left by her boy's heel.

'Salvatore,' he says.

The working of her lips shows the name is her son's.

'Red hair, yes?'

She sighs and nods. 'How did you know?' she asks, as though getting ready for some bad news.

'When did he disappear?' he asks.

She shrugs. 'Last week?'

'You don't know?'

'They won't tell me. The Ca' di Dio doesn't talk to mothers about their children. You know that.'

'When did you last seem him?'

'In the main square. For the alms parade, last sabbath.'

She looks at him, sniffs and rubs her nose.

'Did he sing for clients?' he asks.

Her eyes moisten as she looks at him.

'Like an angel,' she says.

The Angel of Ferrara

They sit quietly for a moment. She wipes her cheeks. Muffled voices come from a neighbouring room. A door closes. The rhythmic knocking of a bedstead against a wall begins, along with animal grunts. The knocking gathers speed, then stops.

He realises Giovanna is gazing at him.

‘They’re the sounds of your childhood,’ she says.

He nods.

She looks down at the shoes.

‘What do you think has happened to him, Giacomo Bonaccioli?’ she asks. ‘To my Salvatore?’

He shrugs.

‘It’s something to do with singing. Men who come here, maybe, who are trawling the city for boys who sing.’

‘Why? What for?’

He looks at her thin, desperate face. A hand flies to her mouth, as though wanting to stop the words getting out.

‘You don’t think...’

He shrugs.

‘I don’t know,’ he admits.

She grabs his arm.

‘Oh Giacomo, Giacomo!’ She starts to shake. Her lips are contorted with terror.

Jacomo places the clapper back in the bell, and hands it to her.

‘Ring it,’ he says.

§

The sound of the bell summons Tomaso Rondelli to Giovanna’s door in moments, the hulking mass of Baxio at his side.

‘Well, fuck me,’ he says, genially, looking at Giacomo with an amused smile.

The Angel of Ferrara

'Not any more,' Jacomo replies.

The pimp walks unsteadily into Giovanna's room, looking at her with a puzzled expression. She backs away towards the curtains. 'Mounting your mother's favourite,' he says, turning to Jacomo. 'That's practically incest, isn't it?'

'He...' she begins to say, but gives up, as Rondelli is now staring intently at Jacomo.

Long, grey, wiry hairs escaping his pony tail hang around his sunken cheeks, like strands pulled from a stale rick of hay.

'I would like a word, lenone,' Jacomo says.

Rondelli glances at Giovanna, but she hesitates.

'Get out, then,' he says to her. 'Baxio, take her to the stufa,' he tells his henchman. 'She could do with a clean.'

She leaves, pulling her arm free of Baxio when he grabs it.

'Don't touch me,' she tells the oaf.

When the door is closed, Rondelli sits on the bed.

Jacomo remains on his feet.

'You shaking, colletore?' he asks, smiling. 'Is that what I do to you, still? Come and sit.' Rondelli pats the mattress. 'Relax.'

After a hesitation, Jacomo does as he is asked.

Rondelli rubs Jacomo's back.

'Just look at the state you're in! Whatever did they do to you, those rascals? You need someone to look after you, poor boy - '

'She has a son,' Jacomo interrupts.

Rondelli looks surprised.

'Giovanna?'

'He's called Salvatore,' Jacomo adds. 'And he has gone missing. She hasn't seen him for days.'

Rondelli smiles, and brushes his fingers through Jacomo's hair.

‘Of course she hasn’t, Jacomo. She hasn’t seen him because he does not exist.’

‘There are his shoes,’ Jacomo says, pointing at them, resting on the bed.

Rondelli picks them up and looks at them, letting out a long sigh. ‘So many of my women claim to have children, Jacomo, I cannot tell you—even Bertha of Saxony, and she’s a man. “Seeds do not sprout on the highway,” you know? And Giovanna, well...’ He points one of the shoes at Jacomo and shakes it. ‘That girl gets the heavy traffic. Can’t really understand it—she must be the oldest we got, and she’s so thin—fragile. Maybe that’s it. I don’t know. Most clients like them plump. Anyway, whatever it is, she is my Via Flaminia, Jacomo. Nothing could sprout there.’

‘What about me?’ Jacomo asks.

‘What about you, my dear boy?’

‘My mother was one of your most popular women, wasn’t she? How come she had me?’

‘Sarah?’ Rondelli laughs. ‘God knows where you came from, Jacomo,’ he says, ‘but it wasn’t that woman’s cunt.’

Jacomo nods, and looks down at the floor, breathing heavily for a few moments.

He gets to his feet.

‘Don’t go, Jacomo,’ Rondelli says, making a grab for his hand.

Jacomo walks over to Giovanna’s door and bolts it. He returns to the bed, and pushes Rondelli back on the bed. Jacomo straddles him.

‘That’s better,’ Rondelli says, shifting his body to make himself comfortable. ‘Just like old times—positions reversed.’ He lifts a hand and strokes Jacomo’s chest.

Jacomo cups Rondelli’s chin, then brushes his fingers over his throat. He leans into him.

‘I know you think brothel boys like me are worthless, lenone...’ he says.

‘Not you Jacomo,’ Rondelli says, his voice thickening. ‘Not you. You were always special.’

Jacomo feels for the pimp's windpipe, and begins to squeeze. Rondelli's eyes widen. He starts to paw weakly at Jacomo's fingers.

'Besides me, I was just wondering if any of your clients had shown any particular interest in them recently, any of the boys.'

Rondelli shakes his head.

'You know the rule,' he says, the strangling making his voice squeak. 'We see nothing.'

'Let me narrow it for you. A particular interest in boys who sing, the nightingales.'

Rondelli begins to gurgle, and his eyes close. Jacomo eases the pressure on his windpipe a little.

'Eremita,' the lenone says in a loud gasp.

'The choirmaster?'

'He's one of Giovanna's regulars.'

Jacomo's fingers tighten again. Blue rings form around Rondelli's watery, tired eyes. He emits a series of quiet barking sounds, his mouth forming strange shapes, showing his polished teeth.

Jacomo releases his hand and eases himself off Rondelli. The lenone lets out a loud rasping wheeze as he recovers his breath. He leans over the side of the bed and retches.

Jacomo opens the door. 'Don't go, don't go,' Rondelli says, panting, staring at Jacomo. 'Come back!' he cries through Giovanna's door, as Jacomo heads down the gallery. 'I've missed you!'

§

Squeals of pain rampage around the stable yard of the palazzo. Like a gang of evil imps, they run among the pillars of the arcade, along the walls, across the roof tiles, over the guardhouse, down the drainpipes. For the servants and stable boys, the noise attracts no more attention than the sound of a farrier knocking a horseshoe into shape, or a

mason splitting stone. But for Filippo it is torture, and now he must run into it, as if into a raging storm.

As he passes beneath the archway leading into the gardens, the squeals become even louder, the orchestra of agony emerging from the outhouse at the far end. Its wooden cladding is grey and still dark with damp from the previous night's storm. Steam and smoke exhale through the eaves.

The smell in the air is metallic, dry and smoky.

Filippo pauses a moment.

Tiredness lies on his eyelids like a pair of stinging caterpillars. Not an hour's sleep, not a minute's respite. Rational discourse and mathematical certainty had failed. Odds of twenty or more to one had, with each chime of the bell, diminished to the point where Filippo now considers it an utter certainty that the man described by the collettore as Angelo's kidnapper, the man who had murdered the poor mason Emilio Rossi, is the cardinal's own gardener and slaughterer Sancto Novellino.

Three pigs can be seen cowering in the corner of the pen on the far side of the outhouse, their haunches quivering like Filippo's stomach.

He approaches the door, waiting for the current bout of squeals to subside.

There is a lull. Steaming water mixed with blood and mucus gushes out from beneath the shed. Filippo has to skip away to prevent his slippers becoming soaked.

The water spreads across the brick path and seeps away through the gaps.

He closes his eyes to prepare himself and pulls at the door. It swings back, releasing a blast of moist heat.

He peers into a spacious gloom lit by flames from a fire and shafts of daylight coming in through gaps in the weatherboard and roof tiles. A huge copper kettle is suspended over the fire, and the ghostly forms of pig carcasses dangle from a line of hooks.

A dead pig lies on its side on the floor. The man with the lopped ear, his shirt smeared with sweat and blood, stands over the body, having just doused it with a pail of boiling water. Steam rises off the pig's skin, which quivers, as though the creature

might still be alive. A trickle of diluted blood comes from its neck, of diarrhoea from its rectum.

‘I find the idiot who fed it yesterday,’ Sancto Novellino says, indicating the faeces with a swing of his empty bucket, ‘he will be the next in the slaughter shed.’

He puts down the bucket and picks a strigil off a table covered in knives and tools. He proceeds to scrape the bristles off the creature’s hide, grazing the skin red raw. At the end of each stroke, he wipes the blade on the soiled leather apron tied round his waist.

‘Want to help, fattore?’ he asks Filippo, looking up.

‘No thank you,’ Filippo answers.

With powerful arms, Sancto rolls the corpse over. He refills the pale from the kettle, and empties it over the body. Filippo finds himself engulfed in steam and splashes of scalding water. He fails to stifle a cry of shock.

Sancto continues with his scraping, beads of sweat running through the hairs on his forearm like beetles through grass.

Filippo blows out his cheeks as the steam dissipates. His skin feels both wet and oily.

‘Sancto?’ he says.

Sancto does not respond.

‘Sancto?’ Filippo repeats.

Sancto stands. His stance is threatening. He seems to loom over Filippo, even though they are the same height.

‘What, fattore?’

‘Can I...?’ Filippo realises he has come for this confrontation ill-prepared.

‘Two and six a pig, right? That what you pay me? That the rate?’

Filippo nods. ‘The cardinal is generous.’ Why say that? Why provoke the man?

‘For that, I expect a hand. But your steward says I can’t have a hand. Says no hands spare because Monsignor is coming. So, I’m on my own. And I got another three out there to do, and five in the sties, for this wedding banquet. So either you help, or you wait, right, fattore?’

‘Help?’

‘I get the hog. You hold it down, while I stick it.’

‘I’ll wait,’ Filippo opts, in a small voice.

‘Stand over there, then,’ Sancto orders, pointing at a corner of the shed near the kettle. ‘Keep them fancy clothes clean.’

‘What?’

‘There.’

Filippo looks to the spot Sancto has indicated. There is a pool of bloody water gathered in a dip in the earth flooring. He steps over to it, lifting the hem of his gown, and awkwardly straddles the puddle, pressing his back into a wooden strut like a martyr into a stake.

When the shaving is complete, Sancto lifts the decapitated carcass, which Filippo notes must weigh more than he does, and slings it over his shoulder. He walks over to where the other carcasses hang. With a deft move, he lets it slip over his shoulder and into his embrace, and with a quick upwards movement, catches the tendon of an ankle on one of the overhead hooks.

He slowly releases the carcass, so the weight pulls the point of the hook through the skin. He fetches a large knife from the table, and slits the pig’s throat. Blood pours out into a trough beneath. He then slices into the creature’s head above the ear, and cuts a line around its neck. Three powerful blows, each one prompting an involuntary jolt in Filippo’s body, open up a huge gash in the pig’s neck, exposing the spine. With one further blow, the head is detached. Sancto presents it to Filippo.

‘Fine pig, that,’ he announces. ‘They feast well on the cardinal’s slops, like the rest of the household.’

‘It will do very nicely for the banquet,’ Filippo agrees, forcing a smile.

The Angel of Ferrara

It joins an audience of heads already spread out on a bed of straw at the back of the room, watching the proceedings with their glinting eyes.

He returns to the carcass, and watches the blood drain out.

‘May we speak now?’ Filippo ventures.

Sancto fetches another knife from the table and a bucket. He slits open the creature’s belly, and pulls out its steaming guts. Shining entrails slither into the bucket.

He goes over to a door facing the one Filippo had used to enter, which opens onto the pig pen outside. With horror, Filippo realises what he is about to witness.

‘Now, Sancto,’ he squeals. ‘I have an extremely important engagement...’

Through the door’s opening, he can see Sancto stride into the huddle of pigs. A desperate squealing commences as he grapples with kicking trotters, quivering bellies and flapping ears.

After a struggle, Sancto manages to get a grip on a hind leg, which he uses to drag the victim into the outhouse. He slams the door shut with his foot.

Sancto quickly wrestles the pig to the floor next to the table, and presses a knee into its shoulder, pinning it to the ground.

‘Pass the spike,’ he shouts over the din, nodding towards the table, holding out a hand, as the pig struggles desperately beneath his knee.

‘The what?’ Filippo asks, dazed by the squeals and spit spurting from the pig’s whiskery mouth.

‘The fucking spike!’ Sancto yells.

Filippo circles the mayhem until he is within reach of the table. He selects a sharp skewer with a bent tip, and hands it to Sancto, who snatches it.

A swift move brings the skewer’s point to the skin between the creature’s foreleg and belly.

Filippo reels back.

With a sharp motion, the skewer punctures the skin and is thrust deep into the chest cavity. Once the skewer is in, Sancto twists it.

The Angel of Ferrara

The effect is immediate. Screams reach a new intensity, and the creature's body and legs thrash desperately.

An exclamation of shock from Filippo is not loud enough to be heard above the noise of the slaughter.

Sancto gets to his feet, and stands over his victim, the bloodied skewer left in the creature's side, jerking around with its dying movements.

The life spirit flares and fades like a ball of tinder.

'What is it?' Sancto says to Filippo, as a few final tremors shimmer through the creature's body.

'What?' Filippo replies, still in a thrall of shock.

'Make up your mind, fattore. You were the one wanting to talk, not me.'

Filippo tries to recover himself.

'Oh. Yes. Some questions relating to...a business.'

'What business?' Sancto asks, pulling the skewer from the body. He carefully wipes the smooth metal on his apron, and places it back on the table.

'I was wondering where you were last night?'

Sancto examines and arranges the knives on the table.

'Last night?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I just need to know,' Filippo says, his voice trembling.

Sancto fetches the bucket to begin shaving the pig.

'Asleep, I expect. At the Belfiore.'

'Someone saw you.'

'They did?'

'They did.'

Sancto fills the bucket with water.

'Sancto, please, wait,' Filippo says, holding up a hand but not moving from his position.

'Time and the cardinal's money, fattore.'

'I can't go through that again,' Filippo concedes, now shaking. 'I will pay you for a pig.'

'I could have done two in the time this is taking.'

'Two pigs, then. Just tell me if you were anywhere other than at your lodgings last night.'

'Who says I wasn't?'

Just say you were, Filippo thinks. Say you were. Say you were with your wife, your mistress, anyone who could corroborate your claim, and settle my mind.

'Answer me!' Filippo demands, frustration unexpectedly emerging as boldness.

Sancto juts out his bottom lip, and shrugs—a child's response. Does this infantile stubbornness mask complicity? Or is it just infantile stubbornness?

'You weren't down, by the camarine bog? About the time of the fireworks?'

A slight narrowing of the eyes suggests Sancto is surprised by the specifics.

'What makes you think that?' he asks, gruffly.

A tremble runs through Filippo's body, but there is fury mixed in with the terror.

'What have you got yourself into, Sancto? If it involves this household in any way - '

The slaughterman steps up to Filippo, the steaming bucket ready to swing.

'What, fattore?' he challenges, menacingly. 'What if it involves this household?'

'We cannot be associated with anything that compromises his eminence's reputation. He is a cardinal, a prince of the church, and if a member of his household were to bring him within smelling distance of any disreputable business, you cannot conceive the forces that will be unleashed: sharper than any blade, hotter than any furnace or kettle. That is a warning, not a threat, you understand?'

The Angel of Ferrara

A slow, noisy fart emerges from the dead pig.

‘We finished, *fattore?*’ Sancto asks.

‘You will be, finished being in the service of his eminence, if you do not give serious account to my question. Where were you last night?’

‘At the Belfiore, in my bed,’ he replies.

‘You would swear to that?’

Sancto smiles, showing an uneven row of teeth. ‘If you like.’

He swings the bucket to douse the pig.

‘Wait...’ Filippo holds up a finger to delay the deluge, and makes his escape.

He stands for a moment outside, and listens for the splash. He swallows the tiny quantity of spit left in his mouth, to cool the bile burning in his throat. He shivers. Breathes. Puts his fingertips to his temples. Closes his eyes. He has emerged from the slaughterhouse no wiser than when he went into it.

The bell tolls. The Florentine Resident Orazio Urbani is due any moment, and no preparations are in place.

§

The boys and men are tightly packed in ranks beneath the apse of the chancel at the east end of the cathedral. Perhaps fifty pairs of eyes are fixed on a short man in a long black robe standing before them on a small platform, the movements of his fingers controlling as if by some awful force of magic the shapes formed by their mouths.

In the upturned bowl of the ceiling, the glistening image of Christ looks down on the sinners of the world. He looks sad, or even angry. In the heavens with Him and His angels, beneath His outstretched arms, are the ranks of Ferrara’s court, the duke’s counsellor Laderchi, the heads of the Trotti and Bentivoglio families, the Bevilacqua, the Dottis, the Facchinos, the noblest, greediest, brokest bastards in the city, queuing for their places in heaven.

At the bottom, to one side of the pedestal of the altar, a mob is being herded into hell, including Roberto Bastianino, the creator of the work, who has several times

needed Jacomo's help to recover what he was owed for painting it. He glances out of the painting at Jacomo with a wry smile, as he exits into the fiery chambers in which the naked bodies of the buggerers, common swindlers and no doubt debt collectors are being thrown.

Jacomo steps into the light of the chancel. The master notices the shifting glances of the choristers, and with a swift chopping motion brings the singing to a halt. He turns, looking at Jacomo furiously.

'How the hell did you get in?' he asks, his foreign voice echoing, the words being caught in the huge, dark emptiness of the cathedral and coming back on themselves. 'This is a closed session.'

Jacomo stands next to the bishop's throne.

'Wait,' the master says to the choir. He carefully folds over the sheets of paper on the lectern, and steps off the podium. Jacomo can see from beneath his cassock that his feet are bare. They slap on the marble as he walks towards him with a rapid step.

'Maestro Giulio Eremita?' Jacomo asks. 'I came to ask about one of your choristers.'

Eremita turns to the choir. Some boys are whispering. He silences them with a clap of his hand. The boys stare down at their feet, as if in prayer or shame. The men do likewise.

'Angelo Rossi,' Jacomo says. He makes sure he says the name loud enough for the choir to hear, and sees over Eremita's shoulder some of the boys glance up.

'What about him?' Eremita asks.

'As you know, he went missing following a rehearsal two weeks ago today—around this time. His mother despairs.'

'And?' the choirmaster snaps.

'Did you see where he went, after?'

Eremita's nose looks as though it has been pulled from the soft clay of his cheeks to a sharp point, the two little nostrils almost slits. 'He missed last week's rehearsal. It was not his first absence.'

The Angel of Ferrara

‘What?’

‘He was not reliable.’

‘What do you mean? You dismissed him from the choir?’

‘He dismissed himself. Boys who do not come every time, they are of no use to me.’

The small man has a lot of rage in him.

‘What about Salvatore?’

‘Who?’

‘Another boy, a singer who has gone missing. Is he in the choir?’

Eremita calls over his shoulder.

‘Is Salvatore here?’

‘Present!’ says one of the men.

Jacomo looks at him. ‘I meant a boy.’

Eremita shrugs, stepping away, to return to his platform.

‘You are a regular at Il Gambaro, I understand. The brothel,’ Jacomo calls after him.

Eremita pauses.

‘So?’

There is no hint of shame.

‘You are interested in the boys there?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘The ones who sing?’

‘I am interested in any boy who has talent. And I will go anywhere I like to find it.’

Eremita comes closer to Jacomo and pokes a finger into his stomach. ‘Now I have some questions: what has this got to do with you?’ Another poke.

‘Careful, maestro - ’

The Angel of Ferrara

‘We are rehearsing the wedding mass. You come in without invitation. You stand there, listening, as though what you hear is just chatter, like you are a woman hearing gossip.’

‘I was only - ’

‘You work for Florentines. Or the Neapolitans. The king of Spain or perhaps France.’ His voice rises in pitch with each accusation. ‘You are hungry for them, for the secrets of my music—I know this, because they cannot make it, they cannot make these harmonies, and they want them, as they want the duke’s city. They are jealous, no? They want to steal it away, the singing, because it is Ferrara’s power, it is what frightens them!’

He turns and points to one of the older boys. ‘You! Run to the duke’s palace and fetch the guard!’

‘Maestro,’ says Jacomo, holding up his hands. ‘I will leave.’ He backs off into the nave. Eremita watches him head for the hatch of the great door.

‘Go!’ he shouts, the instruction echoing around the vaults.

There is no point in pushing further, so Jacomo heads for the great doors. The squeak of the handle opening the hatch is enough to persuade the choirmaster that he has left, and the rehearsal resumes. Jacomo pauses to listen. Though he has visited the cathedral a few times over the years, he has never heard anything so clear and clean. The sound fills the void like a burst of coloured light. The sharp beams of the treble voices become soft in the echoey air, mixing with glow of the basses.

Heading in the direction of the organ loft, Jacomo notices golden light leaking through a side chamber door. He slips into a high-vaulted room furnished with large easels set on sturdy tables. Each table has a lamp, burning a sweet-smelling oil. The room is partitioned in two by a large wooden screen. Through slats in the screen, the shadows of figures can be seen moving around the other side. The scrape of a pestle in a mortar mixes with the sound of the choir.

Jacomo goes over to look at one of the easels. Large sheets of paper are laid across it, covered with musical symbols. In the top right hand corner, the sheets bear the cardinal’s insignia.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo flicks through the pages, to find they are all marked the same way.

Valuable writing equipment is spread across the table: a penknife inlaid with ivory, a gilded sand shaker, an ebony inkpot, its silver lid flipped open. The nib of a quill lying on the side of the table has released a plump dot of ink onto a scrap of blotting paper.

A young scribe dressed in a monk's habit and with a tonsure enters the room through the partition door. He has a bowl in his hands, filled with ink.

The sight of Jacomo gives him such a shock he drops the bowl. It shatters on the floor, spraying ink across the flagstones and the skirting of the partition.

He looks down at the mess, then up at Jacomo.

'You must not be in here,' he says, breathing heavily. Another scribe is drawn by the noise from behind the partition, chewing food.

'Get the maestro,' the first says to the second, his eyes fixed on Jacomo.

'No, no,' Jacomo says, holding up his hands. 'I just wanted a word.'

But the scribe runs off, and the other goes around the chamber, snatching the sheets left on the easels, rolling them up and thrusting them beneath his arm.

'Honestly,' Jacomo says, following him, 'A simple question. About one of the choir boys.'

'Orlando!' the scribe shouts, beginning to have trouble holding the bundle of scrolls. 'Orlando!'

'Let me help,' Jacomo says, reaching forward. The scribe beats him away with one of the rolls of music.

A third scribe runs into the room, slips on the pool of spilled ink, and falls heavily. Jacomo goes over to him.

He helps him to his feet, then quickly pulls away.

'You!' Jacomo is staring into the face of a ghost.

'Leave him,' the other scribe shouts at Jacomo. 'He's a mute.'

‘A mute?’ Giacomo repeats, unable to take his eyes off the apparition. The boy nods in vigorous confirmation. He repeats the gesture of covering his mouth.

The choir has stopped singing. The sound of feet running down the nave echoes overhead like a rain shower. Giacomo backs away.

‘Spy!’ Eremita can be heard shouting, but Giacomo is already racing for the hatch in the cathedral door, and escapes into the cold dusk.

§

Jacomo is within a few steps of Donna Molza’s door to report his discoveries when his arm is grabbed. He glimpses some men—three, probably, one for each arm, another to put the sack over his head. He tries to fight them off, but receives a blow from a cudgel to the back of the head, dazing him. His feet are kicked away from beneath him, and he plunges forward. His arms are caught, and he is dragged across the cobbles. He recovers from the blow enough to start twisting his body and tugging his shoulders to loosen their grip, but the speed and strength of his captors is overwhelming. He tries to pull in a breath to call for help, but the sackcloth is sucked into his mouth, and he inhales some dust. He chokes, and with each gasp, more dust is breathed in, smothering him.

Now his legs are being lifted. Accelerating forward, he is thrown head-first across a wooden platform—the deck of a cart. He slides along the planks and hits the headboard. He feels the deck tip as some men jump into the cart. He can hear the links of a chain being dragged towards him. He sits up and starts to tug at his hood, grabbing at his hair as he tries to pull it free. He feels the cool night air on his cheeks, but a hand yanks the hood from behind, pulling it down and back. The hem bites into his neck, starting to strangle him. His wrists are grabbed and he is rolled over on his front. The hood is let go, allowing him to breathe, but a boot presses his face into the deck, twisting his neck, as the chain is wound around his wrists and ankles, leaving him trussed.

Having done their work, the men step away, and he rolls onto his side. As he lies there, his captors move around him, perhaps to admire their work. He pulls on his chains, causing the links to bite into his skin and tear at the sinews of his joints. They

laugh at his futile efforts. A kick to the stomach winds him, and he can only lie there, while he gasps for breath.

The cart jerks as they jump off. A canvas awning is drawn over him. Ropes are tied and yanked tight around cleats running along the side of the cart.

The cart jolts into motion. He can hear the clop of the horse and the slap of the traces, as it swings around. It begins to gather pace as it enters a street, swaying and clattering across the cobbles. The noise loses its shape as the street opens into a wider space. Festivities are underway—they must have reached the square. Someone is singing. There is a beat of drums and a troop of horses trots by. Friends call to one another, an actor speaks his lines, his audience laughs, a costermonger calls, there is the distant sound of a carpenter hammering, the wood—perhaps a large beam—giving off a tuneful note.

The sounds die off. The street has become quieter, quiet enough for a brush to be heard sweeping across smooth paving. The cart slows and makes a sharp turn. Horse hooves and cart rims produce a metallic echo as they pass beneath the vault of a gateway. They come to a halt. The muffled music and chatter of a party can be heard from somewhere nearby.

An order is given to inform signore.

The awning is thrown back and Jacomo's feet are freed. He shivers in the cold. Hands grab his bruised ankles, and he is slid off the cart. He drops heavily on the ground.

Hands are hooked into his armpits to lift him to his feet and he is marched blindfold across some cobbles, the chain dangling from his wrists hitting his heels. A door swings open, and he enters what smells like a barn. He is pushed up against a wall, and the chain removed from his hands. He is turned around and the hood is yanked off, a clump of hair with it.

Before him stands the singer Signor Brancaccio, standing on the threshing floor of a gloomy barn, his beard haloed by sunlight working its way through the palings of the wooden walls. In one corner, a large pile of grain is just visible. A pitchfork sticks out of

a rick of hay. A ladder leads up to a loft. Two men in livery are stationed either side, some others mill around in the darkness.

‘Messer Bonaccioli,’ says Brancaccio.

‘Signore,’ Giacomo replies.

Brancaccio studies him for a moment, smiling.

‘You going to sing for me?’ Giacomo asks. ‘Only, are easier ways of getting an audience.’

Brancaccio nods as though he enjoyed the joke.

‘I just wanted a word,’ he says, softly.

‘About your debts?’

‘I wanted to give you a warning.’

‘I would prefer cash.’

Brancaccio comes closer.

‘This has nothing to do with what I owe.’

‘So why am I here?’

‘I will tell you if you would just listen.’

‘It’s bad enough having to put up with the singing - ’

He nods to the men either side of Giacomo and draws a stiletto. The men tighten their grip on his shoulders, bracing their legs to lean more weight into him. Giacomo struggles, kicking up strands of hay, which drop gently back to the ground.

Brancaccio grabs Giacomo’s jaw, his fingernails biting into the flesh. He holds the point of the blade, as slender as a sailmaker’s needle, up to Giacomo’s nose. Giacomo stills.

The blade flashes. Cold metal glances his cheek. A pain shoots through his ear. Brancaccio steps back. The blade of the stiletto presses into Giacomo’s cheek, as its point now pins his ear to the rough boarding behind.

The Angel of Ferrara

Brancaccio reaches into Giacomo's jacket, and pats down his shirt. Finding nothing, he works down the legs of his breeches until he finds the dagger tied to Giacomo's calf. He takes it out and notices the blood wiped over the blade.

'Some other unfortunate creditor?' he asks.

Without waiting for an answer, he grasps Giacomo's other ear and stretches it tight across the wood. He squints as he carefully lines up the blade's point and pushes it slowly through the flap of his ear, twisting as he pushes, like an awl through leather. The noise is of gristle being chewed.

Pain races from both ears across Giacomo's brow like two brush fires coming together.

Brancaccio steps back to admire his work. 'Listening now?' he asks.

'All ears,' Giacomo replies.

Brancaccio nods at the two holding Giacomo's shoulders, and they release him. The movement causes the blades to pull at his ears.

'You may leave,' he tells the men. 'All of you.'

He waits for them to go, watching Giacomo with puzzled amusement.

'Colletore: why were you heading for Donna Molza's house, when my men approached you?' he asks, once they are alone.

The question taking him surprise, Giacomo just shakes his head.

'What were you there for? Only she has recently suffered a burglary, so I am most concerned when men of a common sort approach her door. I am sure you understand.'

Waiting for an answer, Brancaccio gently rubs his upper lip with the knuckle of his index finger. The scratching of his moustache is audible across the barn.

'Colletore?'

Giacomo remains silent, bracing himself for the worst.

The singer sighs. 'You are a hunted man,' he says. 'Probably the most hunted in Ferrara. All those debtors you filched. And no longer enjoying the podestá's

protection, the temptation to pick you off, just get rid of you and all your tiresome meddlings is, I have to say, quite overwhelming.'

He smiles. 'So, I will ask again: what is your interest in Donna Molza?'

'What is yours?' Giacomo asks. Brancaccio seems interested in the question, then unleashes a kick to the balls. Despite the padding Giacomo wears to protect himself from such attacks, and having to keep his head still, he finds his head jerks forward adding pain in his ears to the pain in his loins.

'Donna Molza is to be my wife,' the singer announces. He is breathing heavily now, his great chest rising and falling like the prow of a boat on a great swell. It takes some time for him to become calmer. 'My wife,' he repeats.

'Congratulations,' Giacomo says. 'Two singers. Most harmonious.'

Brancaccio thrusts his face forward, until the crown of his head touches the pommels of the knives pushed into Giacomo's ears.

'Do not goad me, Bonaccioli. I am a soldier, not a singer,' he hisses. 'Don't you forget that.' He breathes like a bull into Giacomo's eyes and nose, suffocating him in a gale of hot, sweet breath.

He takes a step back, calming himself a little. He pulls his jacket straight, smoothing the green velvet.

Droplets of blood can be heard falling on the shoulder-pad of Giacomo's jacket.

Brancaccio turns and starts to wander around the edge of the threshing floor, watching his feet as he goes as if they are not his.

'You have demanded many things of me over the years, colletore. Now I want something of you.'

He pauses to look at Giacomo.

'I understand from certain friends staying at the Palazzo San Francesco that of late my lady Molza has been making the acquaintance of the cardinal's factor, Filippo Fiorini. I would like to know why.'

He waits patiently for an answer.

None is forthcoming.

‘You were also seen at the palazzo,’ he adds. ‘Let me put this in a way you would understand: I think you owe me an explanation.’

He picks up the pitchfork, and picks at the points like the strings of a musical instrument.

‘A choir boy,’ Jacomo tells him, ‘a pupil of hers, went missing. She wanted help raising money for a ransom.’

‘A pupil?’ The singer seems almost amused by this.

‘Yes,’ Jacomo replies.

‘And how would you know this, collettore?’

‘She wanted me to collect the boy.’ It is made to sound routine.

‘And that tight-fisted little quill-quiverer supplied it, the ransom?’

Jacomo shrugs. ‘She got the money somehow.’

‘How much?’

‘I just carried the purse. A few scudi?’

Brancaccio stands back, pulling at his beard, twisting the stiff hairs beneath his chin into a point.

Suddenly, he grasps the pitchfork like a lance, and hurls it at Jacomo. Unable even to flinch, Jacomo can only watch it hurtle towards him, the stem makes a whipping sound in the air.

It thuds into the wood just next to Jacomo’s shoulder.

Brancaccio walks up quickly to Jacomo and grabs one of the knives. He twists it, and pulls it out. He tugs out the stiletto too, and brandishes the weapons in each hand. Fireworks of agony explode in Jacomo’s head.

‘I want you to find out the fattore’s interest in her, what makes him prepared to help her. As her prospective mate, I need to know she is not being taken advantage of. Consider your life now in pawn to me. If you provide me with enough information to

satisfy my interest in this business, you can keep it. If you fail, then it will be forfeit. Clear?’

‘As your singing voice, signore,’ Jacomo replies.

Brancaccio smiles, apparently satisfied.

‘You are most resilient fellow, colletore,’ he says. ‘I admire that.’

Slipping the stiletto into a sleeve hanging from his belt, and keeping the dagger in his hand, he backs away to the barn door, and leaves.

Jacomo crumples to the floor.

§

Even in the privacy of her front room, Tarquinia still struggles with the phrasing of Luzzaschi’s motet and the strange rhymes and metre of Tasso’s lyric. The notes and words bounce like pebbles skimming across ice. Tarquinia can achieve no depth, in terms of tone or beauty. Perhaps the music is at fault. Perhaps Luzzaschi’s artificialness, his love of facile coloratura has made the music too light.

Or perhaps it is her. Perhaps it is she who is facile, revealed by recent events to be nothing but an instrument of entertainment, as hollow as the sound box of an ornate and polished lute.

She makes another attempt—she has only three days left to perfect this before Friday’s performance for the cardinal and his guests. Yet still she can find no joy, no fervour, no force of exultation.

A third attempt, but this time she is stopped by a knock on the door.

She beholds a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat.

‘I saw him.’

‘Colletore?’

‘I saw the boy.’

His announcement produces a feeling like a large fish flapping inside her stomach.

‘Angelo?’

‘Angelo? No. The boy we saw on the riverbank.’

‘What?’

He pushes past her and into the room. He looks around. In the firelight and candlelight, she can see that his face is streaked with dirt, and perhaps blood.

‘I was sure he was dead.’ He is muttering like a mad man.

‘What are you talking about?’ she asks.

He turns and cocks his head back so he can see her from beneath the brim of the hat. ‘The boy, the body we saw last night lying by the river. The mutilated corpse. Trickery. Surely a trick. But there he was, like a ghost.’ He walks up to her, stares at her. ‘As close as I am to you now, his eyes as alive as yours, looking straight at me.’

‘The dead boy?’ she asks, still trying to make sense of his madness. ‘The boy we found last night, on the banks of the river?’

He slumps, uninvited, in her chair. ‘Can it be he was still alive, when we saw him?’ he mumbles, gazing into the fire. ‘The wounds, his colour?’

His eyes turn back to hers and nods vigorously, as though he has only just realised she had spoken. ‘At the cathedral. I went to see Maestro Eremita, the choirmaster...’ He once again seems to veer off into other thoughts. He looks down at the ground, as though searching the grain and knots of the floorboards for some route through his memories. He holds out a hand, in the pose of someone holding a spherical object, such as a skull—holds it poised in the air. ‘I was leaving—the maestro kept on going on about the rehearsal being secret...’

‘You are not making any sense, colletore,’ she says.

‘Perhaps it did something to my mind. I heard some of it, the sound they made, as I was leaving - ’

He looks up at her.

‘What are you talking about?’ she asks.

'The music. The singing. In the cathedral. They sang. I had never heard anything like it before.' His voice is soft, almost a whisper. Reflections of the candle flame dance in his eyes, like the flapping wings of tiny moths.

'I was about to leave, making my way down the nave.' He is gazing past her again, as though retracing in his imagination this strange journey. 'There was a light coming from this chamber near the Great Door.'

'In the cathedral?' she asks, still lost.

He indicates with his hand where it was in relation to where he had been standing. 'A room full of desks and easels.'

'The scriptorium.'

He frowns.

'You know him, don't you?' he declares.

'Who?'

'The choirmaster.'

He seems suddenly to suspect the relationship, a conspiracy.

'Barely,' she says. 'He deals with the cathedral choir, and being a woman I cannot sing in church. In any case, his employment is with the cardinal's household, and I am in the duke's.'

He considers the reply, then returns his attention the fire. She sits opposite.

'These monks were there,' he continues.

'Where?'

'In this room in the cathedral, the one with all the music. And one of them was him, the boy we saw, the dead boy.'

Comprehension comes upon her like a plunge into freezing water.

'A mute?'

His eyes are wide with amazement as he tries to work out an apparently miraculous identification.

‘How did you know?’

‘That was Orlando.’ She covers her mouth as she realises the consequence. ‘The corpse, the one by the river—I never saw the face. I knew from the hair that it wasn’t Angelo. But you saw...you must have seen Pelegrino, Orlando’s twin! Oh, Madonna!’

She gets to her feet.

‘I must tell her.’

She rushes to fetch her cloak from the hook by the door. She starts to put it on.

‘Tell who?’

‘Lucrezia, Lucrezia Costabili. The mother. Mother of Orlando—and the dead Pelegrino.’

§

They stand before Lucrezia’s house in the empty Via Mirasole. The lantern in the portico of the Costabili mansion lights the large, two-storey building.

‘Who is the husband?’ he asks.

‘She is widowed, poor woman,’ Tarquinia says. ‘Her husband died not long after mine, I think.’

‘So how come she lives in such comfort?’ he wonders. ‘You’re in a hovel compared to this.’

‘Thank you.’ But he has a point. Lucrezia has managed to maintain the appearance of a widow in her dress and manner, but not when it comes to her home. It far exceeds what she would get from the duke’s pension: the glazed windows, the stone lintels and sills, the imposing door coffered and decorated with brass studs.

Tarquinia walks up the steps to the door and hesitantly knocks, still unsure of what to say. She looks up at the dark windows. It would almost be relief if the poor thing was not there.

The collettore barges past, and bangs on the door with his fist, until the heavy timbers rattle in the frame.

A glow appears and, like a firefly, darts across one of the upstairs windows, then fades. It reappears in a window above the door. There is a rattle of metalwork. The door opens. Lucrezia's son stands there.

Jacomo steps back. 'There,' he gasps, amazed by the sight.

Though it is surely only a matter of a month or so since she last saw him or his brother, Tarquinia might not have recognised him. He has grown so much taller and his shoulders so much wider. His face, though, is the same shape, still almost babyish, with blue eyes pale framed by dark, straight hair like a pair of drawn curtains.

The sight of these two adults staring at him startles the poor boy.

'Orlando,' she says gently. He swallows, and attempts a welcoming smile. 'The mute copyist,' she explains to Jacomo, keeping her eye on him. 'You did some work for me a while back, did you not, Orlando?'

Orlando nods. His mouth swells slightly, as though words are building up inside. He glances back at Jacomo.

'If your mother there? It is about your brother, Pelegrino...'

Mention of the name brings Orlando's flickering eyes back to Tarquinia.

Lucrezia appears at Orlando's shoulder, shouldering the young man to the side, taking the candle from him. Narrowing her eyes and jutting out her chin, she peers at Tarquinia. She looks thin and old in her nightclothes. The skin of her underarms is slack. Her complexion is grainy. Her hair is wiry and unevenly bleached. But her nightgown is that of a young bride, diaphanous even in the candlelight, the outline of her bony midriff and legs dark against the thin gauze of the fabric.

'Molza?' she croaks, frowning.

'Madam Costabili.'

'You choose a strange time, after all these years, to pay your compliments.'

'Madam Lucrezia Costabili,' Tarquinia explains to Jacomo, 'was a singer at court, one of our most celebrated.'

'Before you and the contessa shoved me off stage,' Madam Costabili adds, sourly.

The Angel of Ferrara

'I am here with some news—distressing news.'

'What about?' The words are thrown at Tarquinia, the voice that had been so gentle in Lucrezia's singing days sharpening them into barbs.

'It would be better if we spoke inside,' Tarquinia suggests.

'Well, we can't.'

'Regarding your son.'

'Orlando?' Lucrezia asks, puzzled, since he is standing just next to her.

'Pelegriano.'

The woman's frown deepens, her nose pushing forward and wrinkling.

'Pelegriano?'

'Really, we should go in,' Tarquinia says.

'Just tell me,' the woman snaps. 'This news that gets me from my bed in the middle of the night.'

Tarquinia steps back. 'This person here, Messer Bonaccioli...' she says.

Madam Costabili looks the collettore up and down. 'Dirty, but pretty,' she decides.

'He saw Pelegriano.'

'No, he saw Orlando,' the woman says, as though addressing an idiotic child.

'Orlando's twin,' Tarquinia insists.

The woman's puzzlement is sincere.

She turns to Orlando, who still hangs at her shoulder, towering over her. 'Go back to your room,' she tells him, shoving him with her elbow.

He doesn't move. His eyes, almost translucent in the light of the candle, are fixed on Tarquinia. His mother pinches his arm. He winces with pain, and, in an eerie gesture, opens his mouth wide in noiseless wail of pain.

'Your room,' she snarls.

He looks at her, then slopes away into the darkness.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘What are you talking about?’ Lucrezia demands to know once he is gone, positioning herself in the centre of the doorway as though wanting to block the way.

Tarquinia glances at Giacomo.

‘That is the boy you saw, at the cathedral,’ she asks him, pointing at where Orlando had stood. ‘You are sure.’

He nods.

‘Come on, woman!’ Lucrezia snaps.

‘Pelegriano was found dead,’ Tarquinia blurts. ‘Messer Bonaccioli here found his body, last night, on the riverbank.’

Lucrezia blinks.

‘Lucrezia, my dear, I did not even know he was missing,’ Tarquinia adds. ‘That is why I wanted to give you the news inside.’

‘News?’ Lucrezia shakes her head. ‘That’s not news, Donna Molza. Pelegriano lies in his grave, in the churchyard of San Benedetto, been there for months.’ She leans out of the door, and points down the street. ‘Go and see for yourself.’

‘What?’ Tarquinia glances at Giacomo in confusion.

‘Pelegriano was run over by a cart,’ Lucrezia explains, ‘Saint Andrew’s day last.’

‘How bad were his injuries?’ Giacomo asks.

‘What? Terrible.’

‘He was unrecognisable?’

‘You want me to paint a picture? His body was so mashed, his shroud had to be a sack.’

The crude and heartless way the woman describes the death of her own son is shocking.

Tarquinia turns to Giacomo.

‘I saw him,’ he insists. ‘A dead boy with a face identical to Orlando’s.’

‘Lucrezia, he has no reason to invent this,’ Tarquinia says. ‘I am sure of his sincerity.’

But Lucrezia is unimpressed. ‘Well, he can’t have done, can he? Now, Madam Molza, I am going back to my bed. I suggest you go back to his.’

She slams the door in their faces.

§

The advance guard of the cardinal’s court had arrived earlier that afternoon, Filippo hoping that their boisterous, noisome presence would distract him from the discomfort he still felt about the terrifying encounter with Sancto Novellino.

Within moments of sliding off his horse, Signor Gonzaga had presented the bill for a night’s hospitality at the Cock Inn in Monisteruolo. They had been forced to stay there, signore explained, on account of the roads from Bologna being waterlogged by the recent rains, the river crossings being flooded and their carriages becoming mired. Twelve scudi—there was only eleven left in their treasure chest, the captain explains, so he covered the rest from his own pocket and expects prompt settlement. Twelve scudi—to cover fifteen dinners and beds at ten soldi each, and twenty three at eight soldi, both rates nearly double the amount previously approved. And Filippo counted less than thirty heads in the party that arrived. Nevertheless, there had been no alternative but to pocket the bill and swallow the horror at its size. Always, someone in the end must pay.

The allotting of rooms had gone reasonably smoothly, and most of the party members now seem to have settled. There had been complaints about damp sheets, muted by sending in Michele with a warming pan, and the stablemaster had to find a way of dealing with Signor Tassone’s unruly dog, organising the erection of a temporary kennel in the rear of the orchard out of an old wicker frame, to prevent the dreadful little creature’s constant yapping from disturbing the other guests.

But despite all these exigencies, the afternoon leaves Filippo with a feeling almost of contentment. The arrivals have brought the palazzo to life, like a great tree with birds chattering among the branches, the coloured lights now aglow in the windows its blossom. The challenging preparations for his eminence’s residency are at last coming

to their maturity. After a long winter and slow spring, in a sometimes hostile climate, the ancient tree seems ready to bear its crop of fruit.

One of Don Luigi's gentlemen erupts into the courtyard, dressed in the ancient armour currently fashionable among the cavalieri.

'Fattore,' he yells. He clanks over to confront Filippo, plants his legs astride and flips up the visor. Signor Assassino's face is revealed, fleshy cheeks plumped up by the helm's metalwork so he has difficulty speaking, the wrinkling of his brow like folds of thick cream. 'Someone has changed my cuirass! It no longer fits around the waist, and I need it for tomorrow's joust!'

The problem is a familiar one, suffered by many of his eminence's noble gentlemen following a winter of inactivity and rich food.

A boy rushes up. 'There is a lady,' he reports in a whisper. Filippo glances over to see a petite woman standing in the gatehouse, a hood over her head.

'Fattore!' the knight shouts, banging his breastplate with his fist. 'My cuirass!'

Filippo calls over one of the stable boys. 'Tito,' he says. 'Would you mind escorting our brave captain here to the leatherworker, to get the straps of his cuirass let out?' He gives Tito a gentle push to hasten him, and heads for the gate before the knight has a chance to protest.

'Turtle meat arrived?' he calls to a kitchen boy who happens to pass. The boy shakes his head. 'Tell the chef to tell the... Oh, never mind, I will deal with it later.'

Mention of turtle meat provokes a pang of hunger—the first he has felt after days of nervous biliousness. Turtle is a particular favourite.

The woman pulls back her hood, and Filippo's appetite is immediately quenched.

'Madam Rossi,' he says.

She drops to her knees before him, so everyone can see.

'Oh fattore, fattore, my husband,' she pleads. The yard comes to a halt to watch the performance. 'I have been left a wretched widow. I have no family, no patron, no one to care for me. What am I to do?'

The Angel of Ferrara

She seems to be threatening a repeat of her performance on the cathedral steps. Filippo reaches down to her to help her back to her feet, but she becomes limp in his arms.

‘Madame, please,’ he begs, in a whisper. ‘If you want my help...’

She glances up at him, her look of despair turning into a spiteful smile. The change is so sudden, he lets go of her and steps back, as though he has seen signs of leprosy. She drops to the ground.

Fredo now stands at the door of his stall, watching like a spectator at a comedy.

She makes a show of struggling to her feet. Fredo goes over and gallantly helps her up, taking the opportunity of admiring the fullness of her cleavage as he does so.

‘Perhaps your stove,’ Filippo tells the gatekeeper.

Supporting her by one arm, Fredo escorts the woman through his cramped stall and the small, low door leading to the stove room. Filippo follows.

The room is dark, warm and smoky. The large stove, looming to one side, is lit, and radiates heat from its cladding of ceramic tiles. Filippo shifts the chair next to the stove door into the middle of the room, and invites the woman to sit on it.

With an air of petulance, she lowers herself like a queen onto a throne, and throws her coat off her shoulders, revealing her shoulders.

‘If anyone sends for me, I am elsewhere,’ Filippo tells Fredo, closing the door on him, interrupting his gaze at the mason’s widow.

She sits there, staring at him. The only sign of nervous tension is her working the knuckles of one hand with the fingers of the other, like a boxer preparing for a fight.

‘The body of my late husband turned up in a cart this morning,’ she announces, in the manner of a complaint.

‘I am distressed to hear that,’ Filippo says.

She looks sharply at him, still working her knuckles. ‘The carter said it was on your instruction.’

The carter was not supposed to have said that.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘He was murdered,’ she adds. ‘While in your service.’

Filippo fails to smother a twitch of the head.

‘My service?’

‘Let us be plain, Messer Fiorini.’

Filippo nods, not knowing what plain might mean.

‘That woman’s...’ A bitter smile curls her lips. ‘Her child: I have looked after him all his life.’

‘Child, madame?’

‘I devoted everything to raising him.’

‘Who, madame?’

‘Don’t treat me like an idiot, fattore. Angelo.’

‘Oh. I am sure you have been very loving,’ Filippo says.

‘But as well you know, fattore, he is not mine; he is hers.’

Filippo readies an expression of surprise, but she stops him by raising her hand.

‘Please do not insult me any further with this game, fattore. You know who I mean. Tarquinia Molza. L’Unica. The cuckoo in my nest.’

‘Madame!’

‘Dropped her bastard child on me so the warbling slut might carry on with her career, parading herself before the world’s courts at the duke’s bidding.’

‘I am not sure - ’ But Filippo’s weak attempt at mounting a gallant defence is brushed aside.

‘And while I was to pretend to be the son’s mother, my husband would not perform his conjugal vows. My best childbearing years.’ Her voice begins to crackle, as tears spring to her eyes. She looks down at her hands and rubs her nose. ‘They have been draining away, all this time! She may have lost one child, fattore, but think of my loss. Three or four I might have had! And perhaps the chance of a proper husband, because of my age. I have lost my entitlement to a family, and no one cares!’

He awkwardly approaches her, proffering his handkerchief. She snatches it. The heat has become overwhelming, and he can feel the sweat trickle down his back.

'I always forget to bring one,' she says, wiping her eyes, nose and forehead. She sniffs, becoming calmer.

She looks up at him. 'It is hot,' she says.

Boiling. Her chest rises and falls. Sweat has formed in the notch at the base of her throat.

She catches him looking at her. His embarrassment provokes a warm smile. 'There,' she says, in a tone of vindication. 'Do you not see before you a gentle woman a man of rank and quality might use as a wife? Am I not a becoming woman, deserving of the warmth of a husband's body and the safety of his strength, a woman who would eagerly submit to her mate and bear his child?'

Filippo pauses. 'No,' he says, a touch of desire tipping into a feeling of disgust at her wantonness.

'He kept me, I grant you. Emilio kept me. My dowry was modest, but he took me and, as you can see...' She raises an arm, admires the material of the sleeve, strokes the delicate brocade. '...He saw to it that his work as a mason kept me adequately dressed.'

She lets her arm drop. 'But now I have nothing.'

'Madame?'

'No husband to support me. No money from her, the whore. Nothing. I have been left destitute.'

Her hands flap on her knees like two small flat fish plucked from a pool, as she awaits Filippo's response.

'This boy may yet be found,' he says. 'And I am sure arrangements can be made...'

She looks up at him and shakes her head. 'I am having no more of that business. I want to be free of it.' Her voice is dangerously calm and emphatic. She uses the handkerchief to wipe the sweat off her neck.

'Free?' he asks. 'How?'

She shrugs. 'That is your concern.'

'Mine?'

'Fattore, do not try to slither free of your employer's duty: the boy might not know who his father is, but I do.'

Filippo the heat in his face intensifies. The skin could be peeling off his cheeks.

She stands, and walks up to him. She presses herself into him.

'Fattore, please. You will help me. I know you will.' She strokes the lapels of his cloak. 'You are known to be a kind man.'

'He does not know?' Filippo asks, removing her hand.

'What?' She is now confused.

'You said Angelo does not know who is father is.'

'That is not my point, fattore - '

'Are you sure of this?'

Confusion becomes impatience. 'Of course I am.'

'So he believes Messere Rossi is...was his father?'

She sighs at the stupidity of it. 'Obviously not. Donna Molza told him Paolo Porrino was his father.'

'Her late husband?'

'For goodness sake, Fattore, are you playing a game with me? Who else? The point is, we know his father is not Signor Porrino, or my late husband, he is...'

Filippo raises a hand, presses it against her lips, to stop her. She smiles and plants a kiss. He removes his hand quickly, and wipes it.

'Exactly. So I think his eminence has a part to play in this. I have looked after his son for all these years. Now it is time for him to look after me.'

Walking into her house, she nearly treads on it: a folded letter lying on the threshold, pushed under the door while she was at Lucrezia Costabili's house. A sound, perhaps of the deliverer scurrying away, prompts Tarquinia to swing around, but the dark street is empty.

She picks the letter up, and closes and bolts the door behind her.

Feeling her way into her room, she pulls the curtain, lights the candle and throws some kindling on the fire.

The letter has no address or wax seal, and seems as if by the malevolent force of its author to open itself, one flap falling free of another, revealing a glimpse of familiar writing. Something drops to the floor, as though the sender has enclosed a keepsake. She has to use the candle to find it in the dirt beneath her desk. She blows off the dust, to reveal a purple flap of what looks like flaccid sausage casing.

The impulse to drop it again is hard to overcome, but she tips it carefully onto the desktop, like a butterfly that has landed on her hand. She picks up the letter to read it. The paper magnifies the tremor in her hand.

As before, the writing is cramped, with the lettering awkwardly shaped, perhaps purposefully, to prevent the author being identified, which suggests it might have been written by a hand she could recognise. Words gush out as from the mouth of a sewer:

'He calls for you in the dungeon where he lies ill his lips chapped by thirst his bowels loose in his own filth fingers raw from his scratching the door time for you his true mother to be his true mother to save him the boy you abandoned for the sake of your ambition time for you to care for him as a mother should care for her child on Friday he will be in the back of a covered cart in the Beccaria and at the first bell after sunrise the cover will be pulled away so you may see he is yours from the raised walkway of the Via Coperta the balcony nearest the duke's palace you will signal your man to leave sixty scudi beneath the trough on the corner of the square and only once safely received will the boy be yours to care for or give away again as you gave him away before so carelessly otherwise more will be cut from him until there is nothing left'

A tap makes her jump, a light tap on the door, barely audible.

The Angel of Ferrara

‘Donna Molza.’

She opens the door to find the colletore standing there still wearing that hat, the huge, ludicrous peasant’s hat. He has an excited look on his face and a sparkle in his eyes.

He walks past her saying something—surely not that he has found him, found Angelo?

‘What did you say?’ she asks.

He turns. ‘I know where he is.’

The announcement is casual but so unexpected, takes her by such surprise, the letter is for a moment almost forgotten. And all the hope she had been hoarding, dispensing only in the tiniest doses, like sips of laudanum so she does not become too dependent, is released in an overwhelming flood. She cups her mouth with her hands as she gasps; tears spring to her eyes.

‘Angelo?’ Even to ask seems to put the prospect at risk.

‘Who else?’ he says, facetiously.

‘Where?’

‘The Belfiore.’

She must have misheard him. ‘The cardinal’s summer-house? In the north of the city?’ He is making no sense. ‘Are you mad?’

‘That is where he is.’

‘Angelo? You saw him there?’

He shakes his head.

‘I did not see him,’ the colletore says.

‘You just said - ’

‘I said I know he is there. Not that I saw him.’

It is too much. She rushes at him and punches his chest. ‘How could you! How could you!’

He grabs her wrists. 'I mean it,' he says. 'I am sure he is there.'

She tugs her wrists free and goes to her chair, dropping into it and the darkness surrounding her. 'How can you know if you did not see him? And it makes no sense. It's a villa, a delizie, where the cardinal relaxes to enjoy his hunting and music, away from the politics of the Palazzo San Francesco and the Vatican.'

'I waited outside the hag's house, Lucrezia Costabili's, after our little interview,' he says. 'Two bells passed, long enough for her to dress and fret about what we told her of her dead son Pelegrino. Then she came out of the house, and I followed her up to the Terra Nova, to the Belfiore. She went to the side door, next to the city's north gate, and it was answered by the kidnapper—the man I saw at the handover, with the missing ear, the one the fattore pretended not to know. There was some argument between her and the kidnapper, but he let her in. I climbed over the wall, into the Belfiore's grounds. It's a high wall - '

'How does that prove Angelo is there?' she asks sharply.

He stares at her for a moment.

'There is this building, tall, like a warehouse but built of stone, next to some kitchen gardens,' he says.

'The music library.'

He seems confused.

'Library?'

'So when you said you had found him,' she adds, 'that's what you meant? That you saw Lucrezia Costabili, a singer, go to the cardinal's music library?'

He frowns. 'Why would a music library have grilled windows? It's sealed tight as a barrel. The doors have no outside handles or keyholes. Guards have to live inside it to let people in. There is only one other building in the city I know of that secure—the duke's treasury.'

'It was rebuilt recently, following Maestro Eremita's appointment, somewhere for him to write and rehearse his new music, undisturbed.'

The Angel of Ferrara

She closes her eyes, confused and defeated by his strange delusions.

‘Does the cardinal have lions?’ he asks.

More nonsense.

‘Tarquinia.’

The surprise at being addressed in such a familiar way prompts a glance. He is squatting before her.

‘Lions, does the cardinal have any?’

‘Leopards,’ she sighs, as though indulging a child.

‘Where?’

‘At the Belfiore. He lets them out into the park sometimes, so he can watch them hunt the deer from a lantern at the top of the villa.’

He comes forward and grasps her hands tightly.

‘The boy the kidnapper used as a decoy for Angelo yesterday, at the handover by the camarine, I found him this morning. He is called Annibale, and he lives with the other ragazzi in the old munitions store beneath the walls.’

‘So?’ She pulls her hand free.

‘He was snatched off the streets with a friend last week. They were both hooded and taken by their kidnappers to a dark cellar, where they were made to line up with some other boys in front of a man, a man Annibale said was short and ugly—Eremita.’

‘There are plenty of short and ugly men in Ferrara—the city is famous for them.’

‘But none that would be so interested in boys’ voices. He wanted them to sing—they were made to line up and sing for him, and those with voices he liked he chose. Annibale could not sing, so he ended up becoming bait for Angelo’s ransom.’

‘What has this to do with the cardinal’s leopards?’

‘The cellar where Annibale and Salvatore along with some others were made to sing—Annibale said he could hear roars while he was there, like the roars of a lion.’

‘The duke has lions in his menagerie on the Belvedere island,’ she points out.

‘But the boy was not on the island. Even with a hood over his head, he would know if he had crossed water, and he said he hadn’t. And how many other places in the city or around have lions or leopards? He must have been in that music library. And Angelo must be there too.’

He shakes his head in frustration at her silent incomprehension.

‘Your Angelo sings. Pelegrino, that crone Lucrezia’s boy, the mute’s twin, he sang. Annibale’s friend, he could sing.’ He counts off each child with a finger. ‘All singers! And all taken to that library.’

‘For what?’

The simple question seems to confound him. He shifts back to his seat and sits there for some moments.

‘Angelo has probably sung there, when the maestro wants to try out a new piece,’ she says. ‘So probably had Pelegrino. I think it even has a rehearsal room.’

She fetches the letter and sample of skin.

‘I found this pushed under the door,’ she tells him, thrusting them at him, ‘when I returned from Signora Costabili’s.’

He inspects the shrivelled fragment of skin. ‘His foreskin,’ he mumbles.

He reads the letter.

‘I need you to help me, so we can follow the instructions,’ she says.

He looks at her. ‘I can get him back,’ he says, as though he was fetching a horse from a field. ‘You don’t have to pay these bastards a denaro.’

She shakes her head. ‘Even if you are right, and he is there—as you yourself said, it is as secure as the duke’s treasury. You could never get him out safely.’

‘You don’t think me capable?’

‘I can’t take the risk.’

He returns his attention to the letter.

‘Sixty scudi!’ he mutters.

‘Colletore!’

But he ignores her.

In frustration, she grabs his hat and tries to yank it off. He lets out a yell of pain as it sticks. She gives another pull, and it comes free, revealing a bandage swathing his head.

‘What happened?’ she asks, stepping back. She drops the hat and inspects the dark blood stains around his ears. ‘The wound is starting to fester. I can smell it.’

‘Leave it alone,’ he says. ‘It’s nothing.’

He dodges her efforts to pull the bandage loose. She prods the side of his head, the pain prompting a furious oath.

‘If this is not treated, the infection could spread,’ she tells him. ‘Your ears could drop off.’ She finds the loose end and pulls it free. ‘Keep still,’ she tells him, and the threat of further pain seems to encourage his cooperation. She starts gently to unravel the bandage, which comes off like yarn from a spindle. The smell gets worse. The lower layers are stuck together with dried blood and puss, and her attempts to pull them apart produce grunts of pain.

She fetches a basin of water, a tincture of buck-horn and some camphor gum from the pantry.

‘Have this,’ she says, taking the letter and foreskin from him, and giving him the bottle of tincture.

‘What is it? Some witch potion?’

‘For the fever.’

‘I haven’t got a fever.’

‘You will have.’

He sniffs it suspiciously, then sips. As he drinks, she uses the water to soften the dried blood around his ears. Relaxing under the influence of the physic, his eyes close as she teases off the final layers of dressing—a piece of cloth dyed blue and with embroidery on a seam.

‘Where did you get this from?’ she asks, dangling it in front of him.

He opens his eyes and looks at it. ‘A clothesline,’ he replies.

She throws the dirty dressing into the fire. It hisses and sputters in the flames. An inspection of the ears reveals holes punctured through the cartilage. The swelling makes them stick out, like plump fruit.

Standing behind him, over the crown of his short-cropped hair, she tries to sponge off the scabs. The discomfort causes him to shift his head and inhale sharply, as though sipping the air.

As she exposes the holes and listens to his boyish protests, a strange, comic impulse overcomes her. The feelings of misery and impotence that had been roiling in her belly bubble up as giggles, and she has to cough to stop them.

He turns to look at her. ‘What is so funny?’

‘Nothing,’ she says, pushing his head back into position so she can finish the job.

She wipes his ears dry with a soft cloth, then puts a small quantity of the camphor on her fingers. She gently rubs the oily, pungent gum into the wounds. Her touch stills him.

‘What happened?’ she asks.

‘I went to a cheap barber to get my ears pierced,’ he says. ‘Next time I’ll know better.’

She dresses the wound with fresh linen and takes the bowl back into the pantry to empty it. She leans on the sideboard for a moment, looking out of the window, which faces north, towards the Belfiore—an elegant villa sitting in gardens and parkland vibrantly planted and furnished with bronze fountains and gazebos trailing with vines. The music library sits to one side—imagined now not as an unassuming annex but as a forbidding hulk, out of character with the playful architecture of the main villa.

The abstract void in which Angelo had been imagined, the trackless gloom of his cruel isolation, is impossible to relocate even in this mysterious building, in surroundings where beauty and harmony are supposed to be nurtured.

She returns to the main room to find he is studying her ephemerides.

‘Is it true that the date of the duke’s wedding was set by your reading of the stars?’
he asks, studying the figures as though he might be able to understand them.

‘Yes.’

‘Could you do mine?’

It is a question so many ask, yet somehow seems surprising from him.

‘Your nativity? It would be difficult.’

‘Why?’

‘The date and place of birth is needed. For accuracy.’

‘Saint Bartholomew’s Day,’ he says without hesitation. ‘In the year 1550. Early afternoon. The piazza, outside the cathedral.’

Her surprise produces a look of smugness. ‘I know—how could a brothel boy know such things?’

‘The date is familiar,’ she says.

‘They burned a heretic that day,’ he explains, ‘in the main square.’

‘Fanino Fanini,’ Tarquinia recalls. ‘The baker Renée of France, the duke’s mother, tried to save.’

‘My mother was English—they are heretics, and she went to watch, when she was carrying me, with some of the other women from the brothel. While this baker’s body burned, her waters broke. They took her to a sheltered spot, and I was born there, onto cobbles. They say I came out with my hair the colour of the flames consuming that baker.’

‘It turned dark,’ she observes. ‘Your hair.’

DAY EIGHT

Wednesday, 7th March, 1579

The light of the low morning sun is already marble white, and shines down the wet street and catches the edges of the stone figures decorating the front of the cardinal's palace. Tarquinia turns down the narrow drive along the side of the palazzo wall. She picks her way across ruts in the stone paving, which are filled with rainwater, and passes beneath the archway leading into the rear yard. Bits of gardening equipment are parked around the perimeter, and a barn door is open, but no one seems to be around. Over the rear wall, the windows of the guest wing are visible, all still closed as the palace continues to sleep.

She steps out, a shaft of sunlight coming across the orchard catching her in the face, prompting her to pull away towards the shade of a woodpile. She follows the wall's perimeter round to the mulberry bush, reaching for the key tied to her waistband. She feels behind the bush's branches, until she reaches the door, tugging at her skirt as it gets caught on some twigs. The lock is turned, the handle twisted, and the door pushed, but it only opens a thumb's width. She pushes harder, but it is stuck fast. She throws a shoulder at it, but the woodwork just bounces her back. In desperation, she pushes her back into the bush to get some distance from the door, and tries kicking it, but the noise clatters across the courtyard, threatening to wake the household, so she stops. She peers through the small gap between the door and the stone frame, and can see what looks like a frame—erected, surely, to block the way.

She hears voices. From behind the bush she watches two men emerge from the garden gate, one pushing a barrow filled with tools. They amble across the yard towards the barn.

As soon as they are out of sight, she runs out of the yard, up the drive and back onto the main street. As she emerges, she sees an old woman in a head scarf standing at a doorway opposite, brushing the threshold. The woman stops and looks at her, as though she might recognise her. The eyes seem to follow Tarquinia walking down towards the palazzo's gatehouse. They must still be staring when Tarquinia knocks on the hatch.

After a while, the hatch is opened by the gatekeeper. His eyes are watery with sleep, but widen.

'Donna Molza!'

'I need to see the fattore, on an urgent matter,' she says.

But the oaf does not move.

'Did you not hear me?' she asks.

'He says you are not to be let in.'

'What? Who says?' The gatekeeper is still trying to overcome his shock at seeing her.

'Madama?'

'Who?'

'The fattore.'

'Fiorini? Don't be ridiculous. I am going to perform a concert here in two days' time. I need to speak with him about the arrangements.'

'I am sorry, madama. He said only if you were with the others, the other two ladies of the concerto. He was particular about it.'

Over the gatekeeper's shoulder, Filippo can be seen emerging from his chamber. Spotting her, he comes to a dead halt at the top of the steps. The gatekeeper registers her shift of attention and looks over his shoulder.

‘Fattore!’ she calls. But Fiorini does not move or even acknowledge her. She makes a desperate attempt to pass the gatekeeper, but he is practised in the arts of obstruction and proves surprisingly spry, blocking her way.

She gives up the struggle as Fiorini turns and walks back into the building.

She shifts her attention back to the gatekeeper. ‘Fredo, yes?’ she says to him, the name surfacing in a flush of frustration.

Surprised and flattered she should remember, the gatekeeper smiles.

‘I just...I just need you to do something for me, to get the fattore a message.’

‘What message, madama?’

‘In connection with certain sums of money that are necessary, for the fulfilment of...transactions we have lately discussed. For the song about the angel. Further funds are required. He will know what I am talking about.’

‘I will tell him, madama,’ the gatekeeper says. ‘Now - ’

‘I will wait for his response,’ she insists.

But Fredo shifts forward, forcing her back towards the street.

‘He is busy now, signora,’ he says. ‘His eminence the cardinal arrives tomorrow. Word will be sent if the fattore wants to reply.’

‘Fredo!’ He slowly closes the hatch on her. She is left staring at the woodwork.

§

Jacomo surfaces from a deep sleep in her front room, lying on the truckle-bed she provided. The intense throbbing in the head has eased. He touches the fresh bandage covering his ears and sniffs his fingers. The smell of rot has gone. He lifts up the densely-woven, patterned blanket covering him. The heat and sweet smell of a fever that burned out overnight wafts over him.

He sits up and looks around. The fire is dead. The curtains glow with daylight.

‘Donna Molza?’

The Angel of Ferrara

A hubbub comes from the street. He gets to his feet and pulls on his shirt. Some of Tarquinia's clothes lie on top of a chest. They are pungent with her perfume.

Peering through the gap in the curtains, a great tide of people can be seen moving along the street. They push and jostle, like a cows being herded from market.

A strong sun casts the shadow of the street's roofline onto the buildings opposite, showing it is late morning. The mud on the street is slush, and an awning opposite is tight with water, heavy enough to bend the spars supporting its outer corners. The rain overnight must have been heavy. The river will be in flood, bringing more flotsam to its shores.

'Donna Molza?' he calls up the stairs.

A piece of paper on the desk has 'STAY' is written across it in a flowing, elegant hand.

He goes into her pantry. He finds a ewer of fresh water, and pours some into a basin. He washes his face, being careful not to wet the bandage. He empties the water into a sluice in the floor, and props the basin on the counter to dry. Shelves laden with jars of potions face the counter. A bottle has been left on the sideboard, and he wonders if it contains the liquid she gave him the previous night. He removes the stopper and sniffs it. The smell is sweet and musty with dried herbs, but with a strange taint, like vinegar but stronger. He takes a sip, and the liquid warms his mouth and throat, the heat passing to his stomach and spreading up into his heart and down into his lower belly. He puts the bottle back down on the sideboard.

He returns to the main room and fetches his hat. He pulls it on, checking in a glass that the bandage is hidden.

He eases open her front door, and slips into the stream of people, stooping a little so he cannot be seen over the heads around him, keeping the brim of his hat tipped forward to hide his face.

The bridge, they are saying—another of the Golem's victims, found near the San Giorgio Bridge. The gate looms ahead, the keeper struggling to close it to stem the tide of people pouring through.

The Angel of Ferrara

The road leading onto the bridge ahead is already blocked by guards, forcing the crowd to mass along the bank. Across the fast-flowing river, on the opposite shore, a body covered with a shroud lies at the base of the bridge's pier. The podestà is there, crouching at the waterside, washing his hands, pretending not to notice the horde of onlookers. Two guards with a stretcher struggle to make their way through the undergrowth covering the bank, while three others wait at the top, looking on. The stretcher-bearers reach the corpse, but the mud makes it difficult for them to move it. They end up rolling it onto the stretcher, the shroud becoming printed with a ghostly image of the victim's face and body as it is pressed into the mud.

The bearers get the body on the stretcher, which they lift onto their shoulders. They climb the bank, the corpse wobbling as they tackle the slope, their feet slipping in the wet soil. Negrisolò follows along, watching his men struggle, his hands clasped behind his back. Together with the guards waiting at the top, they cross round behind the toll booth and onto the bridge, and start to trudge towards the city gate.

A violent jostling breaks out in the crowd as people try to break through the cordon blocking the bridge. Women scream, men yell. Giacomo starts to shoulder his way through the throng, trying to escape it, but it is moving like a great body of water caught in a tempest, waves of pressure jolting him this way and that. The top of the gate is just visible among the floating heads. He tries to keep his head down and his hat on. An elbow knocks him in the ear, the shock of pain so strong he loses the sense of where he is. He shifts around, and can no longer see where he is.

He presses forward, just to find room to move freely. By a miracle the crowd begins to thin. Perhaps he has reached its fringes. Then he is knocked again, violently back into someone.

The brim of his hat is pushed up. He has pulled it so low, it tips easily forward and off. He tries to grab it, but it is quickly kicked away by the tussling of knees and feet. He tries to shield his face. Someone grabs his arm.

'The colletore?' a voice calls nearby.

His bandage is yanked tight and his head back.

'It's him!'

The Angel of Ferrara

He elbows his captor, and a scream of pain and loosening of the hold on him shows he has hit his target. But now hands are reaching like tentacles through the crush, grabbing his jacket. Giacomo tries to pick them off, but they begin to overwhelm him. The collar bites into his neck and he topples, taking down several by-standers. A fight breaks out as people try to escape the fray, while others surge forward to join it.

‘Back, back,’ he can hear the guards yelling, as he struggles to his feet.

Elbowing another attacker sharply in the face, he now lurches towards the bridge, thrashing his fists at anyone who comes close. He manages to make his way to the end-pillar of the bridge’s wall, hoping to slip round it, but a sudden movement in the crush of people behind presses him into the stonework, bending his ribs. He flays desperately to release himself, but the force gets worse, like monstrous hands crushing him. He begins to scream at the people behind him to move. He looks up. The light of the sky blurs into black.

It reappears with him now lying on his back, with the point of a halberd hovering over his face. The guard is sweating. The tip of the halberd trembles. ‘Golem!’ The word is being chanted. There are yells for him to be killed. Another of the guards uses the shaft of his spear to beat back the horde.

‘Send him over,’ the podestá shouts. The guard steps back, giving Giacomo room to get up.

Jacomo struggles to his feet, to see Negrisolò standing at the mid point of the bridge, the stretcher at his feet, his men around him, looking uneasy. The podestá beckons to Giacomo. The crowd falls quiet as he staggers up to him.

The podestá waits patiently as Giacomo stands before him, trying to recover his senses and breath.

‘What happened to you?’ he asks genially.

‘Didn’t you see?’ Giacomo asks.

‘No.’ He points at the bandaging around his head. ‘That.’

‘This?’

‘Yes.’

'Shaving accident.'

The podestà laughs.

'Want to look?' he asks.

'At what?'

'The body.'

The whole of Ferrara is watching them.

'Go on; look,' the podestà urges.

One of his guards pulls back the shroud.

'Familiar?' the podestà asks.

It is the half-mutilated face of the kidnapper, the man who had killed Emilio Rossi during the hoaxed handover of Angelo, the man Jacomo had in turn killed, whose body he had dropped into the boggy morass of the camarine. The man with the cheek, eye and jaw mashed by Jacomo's sword, the wounds glistening as though they were made minutes ago.

Jacomo shake his head. 'No.'

'Because they are saying you are the killer of these boys.'

'This isn't a boy.'

'Don't quibble, colletore.'

'The wounds are different.'

'You are this golem, are you not, Jacomo?'

'No.'

'After all, you are practically a Jew.'

Negrisolò indicates to a guard, who approaches hesitantly, taking a rope from his belt.

'I am not who you are after, podestà,' Jacomo tells him, barely bothering to resist as the guard grabs his wrists.

Negrisololo shrugs and smiles. 'Maybe not,' he admits, 'but you'll do.'

Jacomo swivels round to face the crowd as the guard tries to catch his hands.

'He says the colletore is the golem!' he bellows, mocking the crowd. 'I am the golem!'

The boast starts an instant uproar, and a group of men surges forward, pushing against the picket. Like a dyke giving way to the flood, the cordon collapses, and the crowd pours through the gap onto the bridge. But it quickly slows. There is a moment of hesitation on everyone's part, as they try to work out what has just happened. Then the leaders of the mob break into a headlong rush at Jacomo and his captors. About to be overwhelmed, the guards pull back and reach for their weapons.

Jacomo runs across to the side of the bridge and climbs up onto the parapet. The drop is as far as from the roof of a house. The sharp edge of a pier juts out into the water, cutting through the violent torrent like a ship's prow, making violent whorls in the rough surface that suck the floating rubbish into the grey green depths.

His trouser leg is grabbed.

He topples and plunges. The river hits with a stunning slap. Air trapped in his clothes keeps him buoyant, but then the freezing water seeps in. Desperate splashing to stay up is defeated by weed, or rope, or the water spirits dragging down. Swimming becomes drifting, floating becomes drowning, up becomes down, light becomes dark.

Sun bursts onto the face, and a rush of water can be heard mixing with the roar of the crowd. A gasp fills the lungs like the bellows of a blacksmith's pump. The torrent swirls around, lifting and dropping. The current brings the bank closer. Missiles rain down from the bank—clods of earth, sticks, stones.

He dives back down, kicking against the current, which tugs at him, reels and spins him back towards the bank as he thrashes to get away.

He beats at the water with his arms, grabs at it with his open hands, and, resurfacing, glimpses the crowd running along the bank. Their numbers are thinning and their way is blocked by clumps of trees, forcing them away from the bank and up to the road.

The Angel of Ferrara

Waves push him up and suck him down as he is swept around the bend in the river. As it widens, the speed slackens enough for him to grab a tangle of branches floating in the tide. He clings to it, like a water rat.

The ferry is up ahead. The keeper stands on the bank, and watches him speed by. The mass of the water becomes smoother as he drifts around the next bend. The river that was going to swallow him up now bears him along, carrying him far from his captors, his accusers, his troubles, his past and towards Venice.

§

Margherita has her back to the door when Tarquinia enters. She stands on a dais facing the large window, with mirrors placed around her, as she is fitted with the dress she is to wear at Sunday's blessing ceremony. She has one arm lifted, allowing the seamstress to adjust an underarm seam. Signora Ghiberti squats at her feet, threading a length of curtain weights through the hem of the skirt. A girl stands by one of the mirrors, holding a tray of haberdashery. Another maid waits in a corner.

Her dress is of a sumptuous morello satin, striped with gold. Tight around the shoulders and bodice, the sleeves widen to cuffs tailored in the French fashion, which are lined and trimmed with ermine. The cut and heaviness of the materials lend a regal quality that hides, even smothers the wearer's youth.

'Is that you, Donna Molza?' she calls, the seamstress's work restricting her movements. She spies Tarquinia in one of the mirrors. 'I am glad you have come. Step forward. I want you to see something.' Her tone is one of studied coolness. Her manner has been a little wary since their discussion in the ducal gardens. Yet there is a hint of anticipation in the corner of her mouth, which she is struggling to contain.

Walking around the side of the dais reveals the cause of the duchess's excitement: a distinct bump. Margherita pats it proudly, unable to restrain a proud smile.

'Highness!' Tarquinia cannot take her eyes off the miraculous swelling.

The duchess breaks into giggles, holding a hand to her nose.

‘It is not real,’ she says. ‘I thought it would be good to get the girls here to put a small bolster in the waist, to protect my womb, and to foreshadow what is taking place within it.’

Tarquinia finds she is speechless.

‘Erminia here,’ the duchess continues, ‘she seems displeased with the idea. She thinks perhaps it might give the wrong impression.’

She glances down at Signora Ghiberti, who is stifling a furious blush.

‘Wrong in what way, I asked? Wrong that I might be carrying my lord’s child?’

The question is left suspended as the room falls quiet. There is only the rustling of fabrics as the maids and ladies become even more concentrated on their tasks.

‘What do you think?’ Margherita asks Tarquinia. She pats the bump again, tenderly, as though it really contains the early conception of a baby. ‘Give me your hand,’ she commands. Tarquinia obediently offers it. Margherita presses it to the soft material.

‘You have the same opinion?’ the duchess asks, an edge in her voice.

Tarquinia pulls her hand away and takes a step back. She looks up at the duchess’s expectant face.

‘I think it is a wonderful,’ Tarquinia says. ‘Most becoming.’

Margherita is almost rigid with surprise. Then she steps off the dais, forcing those attending to her to scatter like droplets from a splash. She leans forwards, and plants a kiss on Tarquinia’s cheek, folding her arms around her. Over the duchess’s shoulder, in the reflections of the mirrors, Tarquinia sees the unguarded looks of confusion, despair and contempt among the other women.

‘Now,’ Margherita says, releasing Tarquinia, flush with excitement. ‘The matter of this meeting. Let us to the jewels. I thought the choice should be made astrologically, given the success of your earlier prophecies.’

‘Yes, highness,’ Tarquinia says, with a curtsy.

‘Get the case,’ the duchess orders one of the girls. The maid goes over to the table beneath the window, puts down the haberdashery and picks up a small chest.

‘Bring it here,’ the duchess commands.

Bile rises up Tarquinia’s throat as the moment of crisis approaches.

The girl stands before them with the box. The delicate marquetry of the lid features the eagle motif of the duke’s arms. Margherita takes a key hanging from a ribbon tied to her wrist, and uses it to unlock the box. She lifts the lid. It is as though the door of a stove had been opened, revealing brimstone scattered across embers, a great warmth of colour generating a shower of sparkles. These are the Este jewels, in their glory: Isabella d’Este’s parure, Beatrice d’Este’s pendant set, Lucrezia Borgia’s ensign of the Sacrifice of Isaac...

‘I had wanted to wear my cousin Eleanora’s carcanet, but it was pawned by my lord the duke,’ the duchess says with disappointment. ‘He says it was to pay for the improvements to the Great Hall.’

‘How about the necklace of the late duchess?’ Tarquinia suggests, lifting out the long string of pearls—easily worth a ransom—perhaps as much as seventy five scudi at a pawnbrokers, and, broken up, hard to trace back to its origin. ‘The pearl carries the colour of the moon, the planet of birth and motherhood.’

Margherita turns, lifts her loose hair, lowers her shoulders and stretches her neck, in preparation for the laying on of the necklace. Tarquinia gently reaches around to put it on, fastening the clasp among the soft wisps of hair at the back of her neck.

The duchess climbs back on the dais to look at herself in the mirrors. The pearls hang heavily across her chest.

‘They are perfect,’ she declares, tilting her head and swivelling from side to side to admire the effect.

‘The whiteness is certainly very pure—chaste, almost,’ Tarquinia notes.

The duchess muses on this, continuing with her poses, now frowning, stretching the skin across her high forehead.

‘Chaste?’ she wonders. ‘Is that a condition the mother of the city wants to display?’

They both stare at her in the mirror. ‘One might say they have a rather...sterile purity,’ Tarquinia notes.

Tarquinia gestures to the girl holding the box to come closer. She reaches into it, and pulls out the carcenet that is the centrepiece of Isabella d'Este's set, a chain of rubies in a red enamel setting framed by gold, with a large, gold pendant fashioned in the shape of a phoenix. She climbs into the dais, standing behind the duchess, who shifts a little to accommodate her. Tarquinia holds the pendant so it rests on the duchess's shoulder, bringing a dash of colour to her skin.

'Which is that?' Margherita asks.

'From the parure of your great-grandmother,' Tarquinia says. 'The last to bring the Este and Gonzaga lines together, was she not? Red, the colour of Mars, invoking strength and potency, with gold, the colour of the sun, the font of all life.'

Margherita takes hold of the pendant, and holds it up to the light as Tarquinia quickly unfastens and removes the pearls.

'Is it not a little out of fashion?' Margherita asks, fiddling with it.

'Just try it on,' Tarquinia urges, taking off the pearls and putting them in her pocket while she fastens the parure.

'I find it heavy,' the duchess complains.

'Perhaps, yes, highness.' Tarquinia taking it off.

She steps off the dais and returns to the box. She removes from the pouch within her pocket the counterfeit pearls she is substituting for the duchess's, and, tangled up with the parure so the deception is not so easily noticed, puts them back into the tangle of jewellery in the box.

She picks out a trellised collar of silk and silver thread studded with diamonds with a striking ruby pendant.

'My aunt's,' the duchess notes, as Tarquinia climbs back into the dais to put it on. Their noses almost touch.

'Diamonds are lighter in weight,' Tarquinia says, stepping off the dais to allow the duchess to admire herself in the mirrors. 'They take the colour of your complexion and the sparkle also lifts the clarity of your very beautiful eyes.'

‘Yes.’

‘And the red of the ruby—being so prominent in the starlight of the diamonds, it intensifies that Martian note of potency.’

The duchess stares at herself for a few moments.

‘You are right,’ she declares. But then a shadow of uncertainty passes across her mobile face. ‘Not too, how would one say, fairy like?’

‘Fairy like, highness? That is not what came to my mind.’

‘Erminia?’ the duchess says. Signora Ghiberti steps forward, hungry for her chance of redemption.

‘Ravishing to the eye, highness. Simply beautiful.’

‘Yes,’ the duchess decides, the doubt lifting as quickly as it descended.

Tarquinia bows.

‘Highness, perhaps, then, it would be best if you let the seamstresses finish their work, and, with your gracious leave, allow me to return to my rehearsals for Friday’s concert for the Grand Duke.’

‘Yes, yes,’ the duchess replies quietly, still staring at herself, caught up in her reflection.

Tarquinia bows, and heads for the door at the far end of the room. As she is approaches it, it seems to recede. She quickens her step, but movement causes the weight of the pearls in her pocket to shift violently, and she has to slow down.

The duchess is saying something. She is asking for the jewellery box. She wants to see the pearls again.

‘What are these?’ the duchess is saying, as Tarquinia is within reach of the door handle. ‘These are not my pearls.’

‘What have you done with them?’ Margherita’s voice is high.

‘Highness! Nothing! Honestly! I don’t know...’ It is the maid protesting her innocence.

The Angel of Ferrara

Tarquinia reaches the door, and pulls it open, despite a powerful urge to turn.

'Thief!' the duchess screams.

There is a sound like grain being poured from a sack.

The maid shrieks.

Tarquinia is walking through the door, about to close it behind her.

The shrieks become louder.

Tarquinia turns. Margherita is standing over the poor maid, who is now crouched on the floor, surrounded by scattered jewels, being beaten by the length of curtain weights that was being sewn into the hem of the duchess's dress. Vivid weals start to dot the servant's bare neck where the small lead beads sewn into the piping have bruised the skin.

'Highness! Highness!'

Panting, sweating, shaking, Margherita turns to Tarquinia as she runs back in.

'Highness,' Tarquinia says, trying to sound gentle. 'Highness.' She takes the weights from the duchess's hand.

'She stole my necklace,' Margherita sobs.

'She did not,' Tarquinia says.

'They were there! You saw them. Now they have gone. And these...' She picks up the counterfeits and holds them up like a rotting fish.

'I am sure she did not take them, highness.'

Margherita, confused, wipes her nose on the ermine of her sleeve, leaving a trail on the fur.

'How can you be so sure?'

Frustration, fear, humiliation and defeat create a caustic mix, burning hot in Tarquinia's stomach.

'Because I have them.'

The shock seems to solidify the very air of the room.

The Angel of Ferrara

Tarquinia draws them out of her pocket and places them onto the duchess's hand.

Margherita looks down at them, then at the girl still cowering at her feet.

'Get out,' she says to the girl. The poor creature struggles to her feet. 'Get out!' the duchess screams at the other women.

Abandoning their materials and equipment, raising their skirts, they race for the door, and awkwardly give way to one another as they tangle to get through it.

The door closes, leaving Tarquinia alone with the duchess and the jewels, surrounded by a confusion of reflections. Like a fall of the finest frost, a plume of dust raised by Margherita's frantic beating of the servant drops back through a beam of light coming from the high window.

'I thought I could trust you,' the duchess says, her voice trembling with her sense of betrayal. 'I thought we would be friends.'

Tarquinia looks at her and smiles meekly.

'A naive, vulnerable girl—that is what you saw, was it not, when you greeted me off the duke's barge? A pampered princess, alien in the city that is supposed to be her home, carried here to be despoiled and bear a child for an old man.'

She reaches into her skirt and rips out the padding sewn just beneath the waist. She throws it across the marble floor and it slides into a corner.

'Well, you were right,' she says bitterly, tearing at the loose material on the side of her bodice.

'Highness, highness!'

'I was naive. I am vulnerable. And there were you: this mature woman of such poise and beauty offering to be my friend. I was wax in your fingers, and you have thrown me on the fire!'

She sinks to the floor, sobbing at Tarquinia's feet.

Tarquinia lowers herself to pacify the girl, but her reaching hands are knocked away.

The Angel of Ferrara

After a few moments, the sobbing subsides. Margherita wipes her cheeks on her sleeve. She climbs back to her feet, her hair tangled and scattered, draped over her face and shoulders. She looks Tarquinia in the face.

‘Why?’ she asks.

Tarquinia shakes her head, having no explanation to give.

‘If you had wanted it, this necklace,’ the duchess says, battling to recover her poise, ‘you only had to ask. I would willingly have let you borrow it.’

Tarquinia stoops down and starts to collect up the jewels scattered across the floor.

‘No, Donna Molza,’ the duchess commands. ‘You are not to touch them.’

Tarquinia stands, keeping her head bowed.

‘Mark me,’ the duchess says. Tarquinia looks up.

‘My lord the duke will want you to perform at the cardinal’s performance on Friday,’ she announces. ‘But, after that, you are to be gone, from my presence, from your house, from this court. I do not care to know where you go—some brothel, a nunnery, wherever, as long as you are never again in my sight. I do not want so much as to smell a trail of your perfume.’

‘Highness - ’

‘Is that clear?’

Tarquinia fights back the tears as she turns and walks quickly to the door.

§

Jacomo rolls over and struggles to his feet. His skin is frozen where his wet clothes cling to him. He has lost his shoes, and he cannot feel his toes. He looks around. He is near the stretch of river where the body of Orlando’s twin Pelegrino had been found. He can see the imprints of Tarquinia’s feet still crisp in the upper reaches of the strand.

He squeezes out the soggy flaps of his jacket and heads for the bank. He is cautious as he climbs it, dropping to his belly and sliding up on his elbows to the level of the

road. It is clear in both directions. He sets off back towards the city. The sound of a small, scurrying creature comes from undergrowth next to the road.

As he approaches the hill before the road drops down to the San Giorgio Bridge, he slows, edging closer to the crest until he has sight of the bridge and the city walls. The gates seem to have been shut, as there are no signs of movement around them or on the bridge.

Rather than head on any further, he veers back and plunges into a nearby bush. He grabs the boy hiding in it and tugs his writhing body out into the road.

‘You following me?’ he asks.

Annibale cowers on the ground.

‘Well?’

‘Why you do it?’ the boy asks.

‘Kill those boys? I didn’t, you idiot.’

‘No. Why you come back? I saw you as you floated down. You grabbed that raft of branches. It would have carried you away, but you let go and swam for the shore.’

Jacomo is surprised by the question. ‘Because I haven’t settled things here yet,’ he says.

‘Settled what things?’

Jacomo turns and heads off.

By the time he reaches the bridge’s toll booth the boy is following along several paces behind, like a wary dog. Jacomo continues past the bridge and follows the contours of the bank for several furlongs until they reach the old milestone where he had been forced to leave Emilio Rossi’s body. A little further ahead is the track leading off towards the camarine.

They walk through the thick and leafy grove to the clearing next to the abandoned jetty. The chain Annibale’s kidnappers had used to tether him to the tree still lies on the ground. There is the patch of flattened grass where the unfortunate Rossi had lain, groaning and writhing in agony. The rain has washed away his blood.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo picks his way across the rotting timbers of the jetty, and stands on the platform at the end, surveying the bog. A scene that two nights before had been so quiet is now filled with the sound of gushing water. Rills from the river and runoff from the fields have cut through the stretches of mud and tussocks of weed, creating deep basins and cavities. The abandoned boat in the middle of the bog is now surrounded by a small lake.

A hand grips his fingers.

‘Why are we back here?’ the boy asks.

Jacomo looks down at two round, frightened eyes.

‘Did you recognise the body they found by the bridge this morning?’

The boy shakes his head.

‘It was one of your kidnappers, the gangly one, the one I killed and dumped here, in the bog.’ Jacomo looks down at the spot beside the jetty into which he had rolled the body, where the youth’s face and neck—glistening white cartilage and shattered bone and scarlet blood and muscle—had sunk into the oily, black mire. Now, there is only a deep gully with a fast-flowing stream.

‘After the dry winter, the rains and the raised river must have washed the mud away, and carried his body down to the bridge.’

Jacomo squats down in front of the boy. ‘This is where the bodies of these other missing boys must have been dumped, off the jetty—where they planned to get rid of you.’

Annibale sniffs.

‘I want to go,’ he says, pathetically.

‘This is where your friend must have ended up.’

Annibale shakes his head, tears starting to stream down his cheeks like the rills off the fields.

‘Come on. We need to pay these bastards back for what they did to Salvatore. You owe it to your friend.’

The Angel of Ferrara

He eases his grip on the boy's hand and stands.

'Find me a stick, a branch—long and straight, about the thickness of my finger and as long as you are tall.'

Annibale hesitates.

'Go on.'

The boy walks back to the clearing and towards the trees, glancing at Jacomo as he goes. He disappears into the thick undergrowth around the clearing.

Jacomo starts ripping up some of the jetty's planks and putting them in a pile. When he has enough, he drops them over the side, building up a platform around the jetty's supports, bridging the trenches cut through the mud by the flood waters.

He lowers himself onto this makeshift pontoon, and tests how firm it is by shifting his weight from side to side. The planks wobble, but do not sink.

Annibale has returned, and stands over him proffering a stick. It is long and straight, well chosen for the task. He hands it down, and Jacomo uses it to start poking around, thrusting the tip deep into the bog. The mud has the consistency of cheese. Each time the stick is pulled back out, water fills the hole and spills out, like blood from a puncture wound.

The stick eventually strikes an object. Jacomo pushes at it, and it gives slightly as he presses. He discards the stick and drops to his knees to start digging with his hands. His efforts are frustrated by water refilling the cavity and collapsing the walls.

'Pass me another plank,' he tells the boy, 'a broken one.' Annibale looks around, and starts to tug at one of the jetty's boards. It cracks noisily as it breaks free, and he hands down a long fragment.

Jacomo uses the wood to divert a fast-flowing runnel. The gushing water begins to erode the mud, and other boards supplied by Annibale help narrow the flow, opening up a new channel. Jacomo stands, catching his breath, as he and Annibale watch the water do its work.

Annibale jumps down—even his slight weight nearly causing Jacomo to topple.

‘There,’ the boy cries. He points, and drops to his knees to lean into the trench dug by the diverted stream. He pushes his hands into the water, forcing Jacomo to grab his jacket to stop him falling in.

‘Wait,’ he instructs the boy.

A tuft of copper hair sticks out of the wall of the trench. As the wall begins to give way, the smooth curve of a forehead is revealed, white as marble, then two open eyes, black with mud caught between the lids. The gushing water fans out over a nose and washes over cheeks and a chin, the flow following the contours of the face. The shoulders appear, then a chest and a belly, covered in a smock similar to the one Pelegrino had been wearing when Jacomo had found him lying on the riverside.

The channel has now cut a path to a wider stream, and the draining of its waters makes the torrent run faster. Jacomo quickly shifts a nearby plank to widen the platform, and lays down on it. He reaches over the edge and into the trench, to free up an arm. The flow of water is now so powerful, it engulfs Jacomo’s face, forcing him to pull away. But the body is beginning to shift, and may at any moment be swept away. He leans over again, feeling for the arm, and manages to grab it, working his way along it with his fingers until he reaches an elbow.

Grabbing the lower arm, Jacomo tugs as hard as he can, shifting so he is sitting on the boards. He starts to pull on the arm like the sheet of a sail, using his whole weight to heave the corpse out of the deepening channel, against the flow of the water.

As the legs come free, Jacomo falls backwards, and the body slides onto the platform between his legs. Jacomo and the body now lie one atop the other.

Gazing down at the two of them, Annibale takes a step back in horror.

‘Sanvitale!’ he shouts. ‘My friend, Sanvitale!’

The shock causes him to lose his balance. His arms begin to pinion.

‘Annibale, no!’

But he has fallen backwards into the mud. Jacomo struggles to push the corpse off him and to one side. He gets up to see that the boy has dropped into the gully, and has only managed to stop himself from being swept away by gripping a length of root.

The Angel of Ferrara

Jacomo takes off his shirt, and throws it like a fishing line for the boy to catch. Annibale manages to get a fingertip to a cuff, grabbing enough to let Jacomo reel him in. But, being pulled against the surging flow, the water cascades into his face, inundating him, and his grip begins to loosen.

Keeping hold of the shirt, Jacomo pinions around on his hip so he can kick one of the planks he used to divert the water, easing the pressure on Annibale. But the board catches an eddy in the shifting flow and slides into the gully it helped create, glancing off Annibale's shoulder. With a yelp, Annibale lets go of the shirt, and Jacomo can only watch as the boy slides, feet first, down a chute of mud.

The last Jacomo sees of him are his flailing efforts to grip the slime as the water curls around him like the tongue of a great water beast, and drags him downriver towards the maw of the main channel.

Jacomo rolls onto his back, and lies on the pontoon for a while under the sun. Its heat bakes the mud on his cheeks, tightening the skin. He could continue to lie there, let mud now softening beneath the planks start to swallow him and Salvatore up, so that none of this misery would every be known.

But he struggles to his feet, and manhandles Sanvitale's corpse onto the jetty. He climbs up and stands for a moment, staring down at it lying on the timbers.

In a fit of fury, he starts tearing up more of the planks, letting out cries of rage as he hurls the fragments at the bog. But his efforts leave barely a mark, as some of the missiles sink into the saturated slough, while others are carried away by the cascading streams.

Exhausted, he slumps down next to Salvatore's body, and lifts up the smock to reveal the same mutilations he had seen on the boy the podestá had shown him in the undercroft of the castello, and on Orlando's twin Pelegrino. But in this case the circular wound is sealed with a polished wooden disk, like the one found near Pelegrino's body.

He gets to his feet and picks up the body, slinging it over his shoulder. He slowly makes his way across the jetty to the clearing and back up towards the road.

He emerges to discover Annibale standing near the milestone, shivering, with a graze on his cheek, the muddy water dripping off him. Without a word, the two of them trudge back towards the city.

§

Men sit in a semicircle of velvet-upholstered chairs in the brothel's courtyard. From their dress, it is clear most are foreign. The gallant at one end dangles a leg over the arm of his chair, showing his bolstered groin. Some are brazen, others nervous—one looks ready to be sick. A man dressed in a fine camlet cape stares at the women lined up before them like a scholar at a bookshelf. An amanuensis leans over his shoulder, whispering into his ear.

The women stand on the patch of bare ground beneath the pomegranate tree, like a row of skittles. Rondelli is between the two groups, pointing at each woman as he introduces her to the clients: 'Anna the Polack, Bertha of Saxony, Margherita, known as "La Fachina"...' He gestures to her and she steps out from the line. She cups one of her flaccid breasts with her fingers. She has a bruise on her ribcage. 'Not to be confused with our new duchess,' Rondelli continues, 'but I think equally adept at arousing the generative urges of all she touches.' Not many of the guests understand the joke, except for the gallant, who thinks it hilarious, a raucous yelp making others more nervous. 'And here, this young one...' He points at a girl who looks as though she could be twelve. 'Come girl, step forward,' he cajoles. Her hands behind her back, she takes a demure step forward.

'She is our latest arrival, a shy girl, as you can see.'

'Where's the thin one?' a man asks.

'Fresh from the fields of Lombardy,' Rondelli continues, ignoring the question. 'Are you not, my darling?' She nods. He strokes her cheek with his knuckle, smiling affectionately at her. 'Barely ripe.'

The gallant with the dangling leg is the first to notice Giacomo standing at the gates.

'Hello,' he says, pointing a lazy figure. 'What ruffian have we here?'

Giacomo wheels the barrow into the courtyard.

Rondelli turns. 'Bonaccioli?' he says. 'Shirtless and shoeless—you really have been in the wars.' He turns to one of his men. 'Fetch the podestá,' he says in a calm voice. 'You will find him at the Palazzo Schifanoia, where the duke has a party of visitors.'

Jacomo parks the barrow near the women. There are gasps and stifled squeals as naked legs and arms are seen draped over the sides. He removes his grimy shirt from shrouding the body and carefully works his arms under the dead boy's knees and shoulders. He lifts him out of the barrow and carries him towards the line of women, which parts to let him through, so he can lay the body down next to the trunk of the pomegranate tree.

'Get Giovanna,' he tells Ursula.

She rushes up the steps to the gallery.

'Ursula, do not... Stop. Come back!' But she ignores the lenone's commands, running along to the door of Giovanna's chiuso. The guests all look up at her as she bangs on the door and calls.

'What is the meaning of this?' says the scholar in a heavy accent.

'Nothing,' Rondelli insists, making a grab for Jacomo's bare arm. But Jacomo no longer needs to show any regard for the deceitful snake, and swings round, clouting him square in the face. The lenone's nose splatters like a tomato, and he staggers back, clutching it. He stands for a moment, leaning forward, his arms outstretched, as his nose produces a stream of blood that dribbles to the ground.

Jacomo walks over to him and grabs his hair. He yanks back his head, so he can see into his eyes. "'Seeds don't sprout on the highway," lenone? That seed sprouted, and look what you and your like did to him.'

Baxio comes from the stufa. The great oaf is wearing nothing but a towel, and his huge belly glistens like the shaved rind of a freshly slaughtered pig. Swift for such a giant, he canters over the gravel to launch himself at Jacomo. His bulk and strength are too heavy to stop or avoid in a state of such deep weariness. Jacomo's almost lifeless body is thrown to the ground. A fist draws back, and Jacomo awaits the burst of searing pain, the flashes of lights that sparkle through the head.

Then a high-pitched, almost unearthly scream distracts the attacker, who looks round.

A burst of rage propels Jacomo's fist to the side of Baxio's head. The blow stuns the great beast, who gives out a loud grunt and topples off, giving Jacomo time to get to his feet.

While Baxio groans and sprawls, eyes shift up to the gallery. Giovanna stands there, gazing down in despair at her son, Ursula standing next to her with his shoes.

'That's the one I want,' says the gallant.

Giovanna runs along the gallery and down the steps, watching Salvatore all the time, as though taking her eyes off him will make him disappear again. She slows as she approaches the body, a hand pressed to her chest. She drops down to her knees. The other girls cluster around her.

She lets out a long groan, and drops to her knees.

Ursula crouches next to Giovanna, offering the shoes. Giovanna stares at them for a moment as though wondering what they are for, then takes them and gently slips them onto her son's feet.

'Is this part of the entertainment?' the gallant asks.

Negrisolò is at the gate, watching the scene, his chewing slowing to a stop. Jacomo makes an effort to push his way past the podestà's men, but in his state of exhaustion and despair, he is quickly overcome.

§

Litter from the day's joust flutters past Tarquinia's skirts, blown by a sharp gust of wind sweeping across the dark, empty piazza. Tapestries, flags, pennants begin to flap wildly. The canvas of the royal pavilion near the entrance to the duke's palace balloons like the belly of some inhaling giant. The heavy awnings hung on one of the triumphal archways pull at their tethers and the wooden scaffold creaks. The fence lining the temporary tilt-yard in the centre of the square bends, and the shields of triumphant knights hanging from the branches of a golden tree clatter.

She pulls her shawl tight around her shoulders as she reaches the facade of the cathedral—the cliff-face craggy with friezes and niches. The Madonna of the Pomegranates stands at the apex of the porch. She stares down at the infant resting peacefully in her arms. Even in the gloom of dusk, Tarquinia can see how smug she looks.

Inside, the cathedral is almost empty, a few ghostly figures moving around the transept in pools of faint lamplight, shifting lecterns and pews, perhaps for the wedding ceremony. She walks quietly up the side aisle towards the ambulatory, and comes to the elaborate wrought-iron gate leading into the San Giorgio chapel.

She feels for the offertory box, and drops ten brass soldo into the slot. She takes a candle and lights it. Crossing herself, she approaches the altar and lights the three candles sitting on it. She stands back. The lights cast a flickering calvary onto the rear wall. Above, the picture of St George is illuminated. Tarquinia drops to her knees and gazes up at Princess Sabra, who stands tall and erect upon a rock at the edge of the lake, her back to the outcrop of a cliff, gazing with serene detachment at the dragon's head. The monster's tongue flicks from its mouth as the knight's lance spears its flared nostril.

She removes the foreskin from her pocket and places it on the altar. She steps back and bows her head, closes her eyes and clasps her hands, trying to summon the intense and innocent sincerity of a child at confirmation. She has done all she can do. There is nowhere else to go, no one else to help, no way of securing the money in time. Now she must surrender Angelo's fate to the mercy of the Lord.

She begins to whisper her beseeching words, her desperate orisons, but they fall like pebbles from her mouth onto the stone cold floor.

She is not praying for him but for herself, for an escape from her predicament, to be absolved of her selfishness and ambition.

She inhales deeply. The sacred air fills her lungs, surprising her with its purity and vigour. Her throat opens; the love and hope pour out, released like birds from a cage...

No joy so exquisite

The Angel of Ferrara

*Did Love or fickle Fortune ever devise,
In partial mood, for favoured votaries,
But I would barter it
For one dear glance of those angel eyes -*

‘Donna Molza?’

The male voice freezes the breath inside her, producing an intense pain in her chest. She turns. The deacon stands at the entrance to the chapel, a look of sly amusement on his face.

Clasping one hand in another, he walks towards her.

‘You know it is prohibited for a woman’s voice to be heard in church, madama, even yours,’ says Don Schiatti. ‘Did Paul not say in his letter to the Corinthians, “Let your women keep silence in the churches”?’

Paul’s prohibition is enacted—she finds she has nothing to say.

His eye falls to the silk altar cloth. He steps past her and peers at the offering she left resting there. ‘What is this?’ he asks, a note of disgust in his voice. ‘It amazes me what people leave!’ Using his sleeve to protect his fingers, he picks it up and throws it across the chapel. She watches it slide beneath the metal screen separating the chapel from the aisle.

She gets to her feet, trying to contain the humours roiling so violently inside her.

He is staring at her, puzzled. A man who has never liked women, he seems to find her presence slightly disgusting.

‘Do you have something to confess, Donna Molza?’ he asks.

She shakes her head, but she cannot stop the feelings erupting, dripping from her eyes and her nose and onto the floor.

‘I cannot,’ she says, her voice a croak.

‘Those angel eyes? A lover’s eyes? Are they the cause of your distress? Are they why you are here?’

She nods.

‘Have you been wicked, Donna Molza?’ he asks. ‘Have you alienated yourself from the Lord’s mercy?’

All she can do is nod again.

§

Filippo is led by a servant through the empty stone hall to the circular stairs in St Catherine’s Tower. They begin the long climb to the top of the castello. There is no lighting, and Filippo trips, grazing his shins on the steps.

‘Fattore?’ The servant’s voice echoes down the spiral from far above, but there is no concern in his voice.

‘I come, I come,’ Filippo replies, covering his embarrassment. A day left before his eminence’s arrival, and Negrisolò summons him. Has the podestà no conception of the fleeting length of days, no sympathy for the press of occasions?

They reach a small room which, like the staircase, is dark. The smell of wet plaster stings the nostrils.

‘In there, fattore,’ the servant says. Slits of light outline a closed door on the opposite side of the chamber. Filippo hears voices as he approaches, someone calling, ‘Are you up there?’.

He opens the door and finds himself at the threshold of the Hall of Games. The glow from two fully-lit candelabra is almost dazzling. Two men stand in the middle of hall: the podestà and—Filippo can barely believe his eyes—Giovanni Battista Laderchi. His highness’s chamberlain has not been seen out of his bedclothes at this hour since the affair of the duke’s self-inflicted stab-wound.

Don Laderchi looks thinner and more fragile than ever; the strains of the wedding week have taken their toll. His skin is slack and blotched. His pale satin gown hangs off his shoulders like from broken branches. Negrisolò, in contrast, seems to be thriving: as solid and stout as ever, his red cheeks bulbous with hot blood.

They both stare up at the ceiling, in the attitude of men looking into the branches of a tree for a hawk. Filippo follows their gaze. He wishes he had not. He beholds a work of such bold magnificence it seriously rivals—no, surpasses Baptista's renovation work on the ceiling in his eminence's Great Hall. Is this the reason for his untimely summons to the castello—to show off how successfully members of the duke's household have glorified their master, and to belittle Filippo's paltry efforts on behalf of his eminence? Can Duke Alfonso really be so jealous of his younger brother? Is he so petty he needs to suffer Don Luigi's agent to despair of the Palazzo San Francesco's endeavours to rival the ducal court?

If so, his highness has succeeded. The duke's ceiling is better than his eminence's not merely by degree; it excels in style. This is what ceilings will look like in the coming epoch. No more ponderous gildings of imaginary fruits, but lithe, almost carnal depictions of mankind that would make even the pagan ancients blush.

Each painted panel, framed by richly decorated beams and coffers, features groups of naked athletes painted so vividly, they seem to leap from the plaster. Each is engaged in a different sport: discus throwing, acrobatics, ball and brassard, swimming and wrestling. The representation of lithe flesh and muscular movement is vigorous and uninhibited, all cleverly associating Duke Alfonso with the virtues of manly virility, at a time when doubts have developed about his capability of siring an heir. Even a man of Filippo's questionable judgement when it comes to matters of taste can see it is wonderful, clever and devastating for all who pretend to rival this great dynast.

A hatch opens in the diamond coffer between two panels. The pale face of a boy can be seen in the darkness above. Two ends of heavy rope drop from the ceiling, and slap on the marble floor. Don Laderchi takes one end and pulls gently at it like a bell rope; the other end lifts.

'It will hold, signore,' Negrisolò reassures the chamberlain. 'The fixing is reinforced.'

'I was summoned, illustrismo,' Filippo prompts, trying not to sound piqued. 'A matter of some urgency?'

Don Laderchi turns. 'Fattore,' he says in his gentle voice, a voice that seems to emerge from his mouth as if without breath. 'I am grateful for your presence here.' He taps Negrisolo's shoulder. 'He is here,' he tells him.

Negrisolo nods as he looks at Filippo, his expression almost theatrically solemn.

'Illustrismo, I am currently much engaged in - ' Filippo says.

'Please, fattore - ' Don Laderchi interrupts, gently, with a smile.

'With his eminence soon to arrive, and preparations at the Palazzo San Francesco as yet incomplete, I was wondering if...' Filippo unexpectedly finds his throat tightening, as though he might almost be ready to sob.

Don Laderchi walks over and lays a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. He indicates a long table at the opposite end of the room. Five chairs are drawn up on the far side of it, one of which is occupied by a man in a magistrate's cloak frantically fingering through a portfolio of papers. 'Please go and sit next to Magister Grillenzoni, fattore,' the chamberlain says.

'What is happening?' Filippo whispers, allowing the podestà to take his arm and steer him towards the table.

'Make yourself at ease next to the lawman there,' Negrisolo says, and returns to the middle of the room. He and the chamberlain exchange whispers.

Filippo takes his place. The magistrate is new to him, possibly to Ferrara. There is a Mantuan family with the same surname. Perhaps Magister Grillenzoni arrived with the duchess's suite.

Filippo leans over. 'I don't understand,' he whispers. 'What am I supposed to do?'

The magistrate is in the process of putting a pile of papers away in a satchel at his feet. A glimpse of them suggests they are transcripts of interviews of some sort.

The podestà and chamberlain tug at the rope and talk to one another, as though limbering up for an athletic tournament of some sort.

The magistrate, ignoring his neighbour, takes a mother-of-pearl writing set from the satchel. He slides off the lid, revealing several freshly cut quills, a paring knife with

a carved ivory handle, a sand shaker with its holes cleverly arranged to describe the shape of an imperial eagle, and a glass inkwell. The pale wood lining of the box is pristine, untouched by ink stains.

‘In the circumstances,’ the magistrate announces to the room, ‘I propose to act as clerk. It is more confidential than using a scrivener.’ As he says this, he struggles to remove the lid of the inkwell.

‘If I may,’ Filippo says, taking it from him. ‘They twist, thus.’ He opens it with expert ease and places it on the table.

Don Laderchi has come to sit the other side of the magistrate, in the central of the five chairs. He lays his forearms on the table, and presses one palm to the other. The moves are almost priestly.

The podestà goes to the door at the far end of the room, through which Filippo entered, and calls gruffly to someone beyond. He then walks briskly across to the table, as though away from a firework he has just lit. He takes the chair next to Don Laderchi at the far end of the table.

For a moment, the four sit without speaking, the quiet punctuated only by a soft belch from Negrisolò. Filippo wonders if the empty chair next to him is awaiting the mysterious visitor about to enter the room.

The figure who appears at the doorway is in a terrible state. His head is swathed in a stained bandage, his cheek is grazed, he is wearing no shirt and his breeches are torn and covered in mud. He sways, blinking in the light. It is the colletore.

His hands tied behind his back, Negrisolò’s man Quarengo gives him a shove from behind. The colletore staggers and lands heavily on his front, his chin crashing on the shiny floor.

The magistrate dips the nib of his quill into the inkwell.

‘Here is the man Giacomo Bonaccioli, formerly the colletore of the Jews, accused of having most grievously disturbed the peace of his highness Duke Alfonso by the mutilation and murder of certain youths lately found on the banks of the river,’ Negrisolò declares, as they watch Giacomo, unaided by Quarengo, squirm and struggle

to his feet, a difficult manoeuvre that involves rolling onto his back, sitting up, then rolling onto his knees. 'Four corpses in our mortuary as I speak—one discovered the week before last, one just two nights ago—the said Bonaccioli seen running away from the scene by one of my men, another discovered today by the San Giorgio Bridge, and yet another the said Bonaccioli was in possession of when we made our arrest. All horribly and cruelly mutilated—three with their privities cut off.'

'Found with a body?' Filippo asks, his heart clamouring and his bowel churning.

'Did you not hear, *fattore*?' Don Laderchi says earnestly. 'This afternoon, carrying his latest victim. A ragazzo of some sort, horribly cut. The poor creature's blood was all over this man's clothes. You can see the stains on his breeches.'

Don Laderchi waggles his fingers at Giacomo.

'He even taunted his victim's mother with the corpse of her own son!'

Jacomo looks up and catches Filippo's eye. His face is lifeless with exhaustion and resignation.

Filippo looks down at the table.

'But we bring him here on another matter,' the chamberlain says. He is tapping his hand against the tabletop with a slow rhythm. 'A certain allegation he has made.' A feeling of deep dread descends.

'Allegation?' Filippo asks.

The *colletore* now stands in the middle of the room, Quarengo behind him, fiddling with the rope.

'I understand you were given some holy water, before you were brought here,' Don Laderchi reminds Giacomo. 'Is this correct?'

Jacomo does not respond, but stands with his chin on his chest, as his body is jerked around by Quarengo's efforts.

'Podestà?' Don Laderchi refers the question to Negrisolò.

'Yes, *illustrismo*. We have also given him a whiff of the sulphur.'

‘So, for the sake of your soul, you must speak truthfully, must you not?’ Don Laderchi waits for an acknowledgement, but none is forthcoming. ‘Right. We shall proceed.’

An hour ago, Filippo had been supervising the preparations of the cardinal’s private apartments, helping lay out his eminence’s clothes, while awaiting news from the accompanist about the temperamental musical instrument installed in the Great Hall for Friday’s performance by Donna Molza and the Concerto delle Donne. The kitchens had received the last of the supplies they needed for the banquet, and a suitable donkey had been selected from the stables to convey the cardinal from San Giorgio Gate to the castello for his formal reception by the duke. All was being put in place for Don Luigi’s arrival, awaiting just a few final touches and adjustments. And now Filippo sits here, surrounded by all this painterly flamboyance, required for no apparent purpose other than to witness the torture of this poor young man wrongly accused of a terrible crime.

‘Fattore?’

Don Laderchi is leaning forward and looking along the table at Filippo, as if to check he is paying attention.

‘Yes, illustrismo?’

‘Are you ready?’

‘For what, illustrismo?’

Don Laderchi leans back to address the colletore. Quarengo stands to one side, holding the free end of the rope. A terrible foreboding wafts through the room like a miasma.

‘You have asserted, Bonaccioli,’ the chamberlain says, maintaining his gentle and reasonable tone, ‘that there is a connection between the boy who remains missing, this Angelo Rossi, son of the mason Emilio Rossi—himself now also missing—a connection between the said Angelo and his eminence the cardinal’s household.’

Filippo’s ears are filled with a thudding sound. What has the colletore said? Is it about Sancto Novellino? Why had Filippo not pursued this matter with more diligence,

when the opportunity presented itself? Why had he not investigated the brute's alibi? No, this could be worse. Giacomo has guessed the boy's paternity...

The magistrate's pen is poised to record the truth.

Then, the faintest voice, almost a drawl: 'He is held by them.'

Filippo becomes aware that the colletore is looking at him.

'Held by us?' Filippo says, barely able to make sense of the words.

Don Laderchi is saying something.

'Sorry, illustrismo—the surprise. I did not hear you...'

'I was saying, fattore, that it is what we might come to expect of this wretch. He will lose no opportunity to traduce the reputations of his betters for his selfish interests. I have personal experience. Nevertheless, you need to answer the charge.'

'Charge?'

'That you, the representative of the cardinal's household here in Ferrara, have this boy, this Angelo—that is what the wretch is alleging.'

'No, Illustrismo, no!'

'I thought not. Why would you?'

Don Laderchi turns back to face Giacomo.

'So, Bonaccioli, where do you have this boy? What have you really done with him?'

'I do not have him,' Giacomo growls, in a clearer voice. 'He does.' He nods at Filippo. 'In the Belfiore.'

'The cardinal's summer-house? Are you being facetious, Bonaccioli?'

'I saw the kidnapper there—the man who took him, with the lopped ear.'

Filippo struggles to control a surge of anger. This is surely a lie. Even if Sancto were involved, why would he keep his captive at the Belfiore?

'This testimony is getting more ridiculous by the word,' says the chamberlain. 'Must you force us to wring the truth from you like slops from a dirty mop?' the chamberlain

asks. Giacomo does not reply. 'So be it,' Don Laderchi says, with a hint of a sigh, and gestures to the podestá.

Negrisololo gestures to Quarengo and the henchman begins to haul the rope. Giacomo's wrists rise behind his back like the arms of a crane.

'Tell us what you have done with this boy Angelo Rossi,' Negrisololo says.

The reply is a series of staccato grunts as Giacomo's shoulders begin to twist.

Quarengo tugs harder, causing Giacomo suddenly to pitch forward, and his feet to slide back, so he is now suspended by his arms, producing a gasp of pain. The shift of weight causes Quarengo, still holding on to the rope, to lose his footing and lift slightly off the ground. The henchman dances around the floor as he recovers traction, the movement jerking the rope. The whole performance is a hideous combination of pain and comedy.

'Please,' Filippo finds himself mumbling. 'Please, no.'

But Quarengo manages to reel in another cubit of rope, twisting the colletore's body into even greater contortions, his roped hands, clenched with pain, becoming like two gnarled galls on the ends of his sinewed arms.

'Where is the boy?' Negrisololo repeats.

Giacomo is gasping so much, he appears unable to speak. Negrisololo orders Quarengo to ease the tension a little.

'In the cardinal's villa!' Giacomo cries, as soon as he has the breath to speak. 'The music library there.'

'The library? Colletore, please!' Filippo finds himself shouting. 'Podestá!' He appeals to Negrisololo. 'Why is he saying this?'

Negrisololo shrugs.

Now using all his weight, Quarengo pulls again on the rope, and Giacomo's feet are clear of the floor. The grunts explode into an ear-piercing scream, unbearable in its intensity.

'Oh, my goodness!' Don Laderchi can be heard saying.

The screams continue, interrupted only by gasps, the pitch, the body, the volume, the intensity all going up and up, until the room is filled with a sound that it seems barely plausible could emerge from a man's throat.

'Illustrismo!' Filippo yells, leaping to his feet. 'Illustrismo! Please!'

Don Laderchi is covering his face. Negrisolo raises a hand. In a series of jerks, Quarengo gives out the rope, and Giacomo drops. His legs crumple beneath him as he lands back on the floor and crashes to his knees. He lurches forward, until he is left with his legs lying on the ground, his head slumped between his shoulders, but his torso lifted, his arms still raised behind him, like the broken wings of a bird.

'Fattore?' Don Laderchi asks, a little breathless.

A trickle of urine pours from between the collettore's legs. As it spreads across the floor, Quarengo lets go of the rope, so Giacomo drops face first onto the marble. Quarengo steps back to prevent his boots becoming soaked.

Quiet descends upon the room like a fall of snow.

'This is wrong,' Filippo protests, meekly.

'We realise that, fattore, which is why we are resorting to these measures to discover the truth.'

'I mean, I cannot believe he was involved in the taking or murder of any of these boys,' Filippo says quietly, almost afraid to disturb the hush. 'I have known the collettore since he was a boy roaming the streets, illustrismo. I knew his unfortunate mother.'

'Didn't we all,' Negrisolo smirks.

'Podestà,' Don Laderchi scolds, with a light slap of his arm. They seem almost to be enjoying a moment of light relief.

'I cannot believe it,' Filippo repeats. 'Such cruelty is beyond his...nature.'

Don Laderchi is aghast. 'This man takes a relish in destroying livelihoods,' he points out, gesturing at Giacomo, his calm voice now edged with anger. 'Is it so hard to believe he would stop at destroying lives?'

Filippo cannot think what to say.

‘It never occurred to me, *fattore*,’ Don Laderchi continues, ‘when I summoned you to hear these allegations against your own master that you would defend the accuser. But then...’ Don Laderchi licks his lips thoughtfully, as though he is reassessing the situation. ‘But then, perhaps your object is to save this wretch to condemn the Jew. After all, if Bonaccioli is guilty, then it surely means Messer Mendes is innocent, particularly as the Jew has been in the *podestá*’s custody when these most recent murderous acts were discovered.’ There is another pause as he prepares to tease out further implications, like stitching in an infected wound. ‘Perhaps that is what you want to avoid—the exoneration of the Jew.’

‘No...yes...’ Filippo pleads, confused, but Laderchi raises his hand to silence him.

‘Perhaps you are afraid Messer Mendes’s release will be followed by his highness reinstating the *condotta* and thereby the Jews’ debts. Having borrowed so liberally of them, might not such an outcome result in your master’s bankruptcy? Is that not your situation, *fattore*? After all, was it not you who instigated the search for this boy in the first place, drawing attention away from, say, the cardinal’s properties and instead to the ghetto and Messer Mendes’s house?’

Filippo shakes his head, becoming overwhelmed by the onslaught of accusation.

‘Are you in league with this man?’ The chamberlain’s voice has dropped a register, as if to indicate an even more serious state of affairs. ‘Have you been conspiring with him?’

‘No, *illustrismo*! No!’

‘Right.’ The chamberlain’s voice recovers its more level tone. ‘So we can take it you accept his guilt?’

Filippo cannot bring himself to say.

‘We can ignore these allegations about your master’s household, about you holding this unfortunate boy in his eminence’s summer-house?’

The answer emerges as a croak.

‘Pardon, *fattore*?’

The Angel of Ferrara

Filippo coughs. 'Yes, illustrismo. The allegations, they are not true. We do not have this boy. You have my word.'

The magistrate scratches the answers down in his execrable hand.

'Good. So what say you of this man's guilt?' Laderchi asks.

Filippo tries to swallow, but his mouth is as dry as a flour mill.

'Perhaps,' Negrisolo interjects, 'the fattore would prefer that we intensify the interrogation, to get the accused to withdraw these allegations against the cardinal's household. After all, there is a lot more work for the rope to do.'

'Fattore?' Don Laderchi asks, passing the suggestion on.

'No,' Filippo says quickly.

'So you accept his man's guilt?'

Filippo glances at Giacomo, who is not moving.

'Yes, illustrismo,' he says.

'Good.' Don Laderchi slaps the table and turns to Negrisolo. 'See to it, then, that, once the celebrations of his highness's nuptials are over, the Jew is freed, and that this man is held close until the charges can be put to his highness's forthcoming assizes.'

'Yes, domine,' the podestá replies.

'Now.' Don Laderchi gets to his feet, prompting Filippo, the magistrate and the podestá smartly to do likewise. 'I must be at the duke's palace. It is surely now only a matter of a few hours before your master his highness's brother arrives, fattore, and I have much to do!'

The chamberlain walks round the table and over to the colletore. He lifts the hem of his gown and steps gingerly towards the colletore's head, avoiding the pool of piss. He squats down and proffers a hand to the colletore, whose face rests on his cheek, as he emits a series of short grunts.

'Recognise the ring, colletore?' the chamberlain whispers. 'The one you took from me? As you can see, I got it back.'

The chamberlain's hand has formed a fist, with his ring finger protruding slightly.

The Angel of Ferrara

'Kiss it,' the chamberlain says. 'Kiss the ring you took from me.'

Jacomo does not move.

In a sudden move, Don Laderchi punches it into Jacomo's face. Filippo has never seen a gesture of such shocking violence from the chamberlain.

Don Laderchi stands, steps away from the colletore's grunting body, and heads swiftly for the door.

DAY NINE

Thursday, 8th March, 1579

They come and go like fits. Not stabbing—stabs do not hurt when they happen; the pain is later, when they burst like a deep blister. These are not like stabs. They gnaw right into the bone. Aches, but aches are mild and these are not. They are sharp, like thorns on a stem of a twisting vine that has somehow grown around the bones in the arms and shoulders, and is now being slowly drawn out.

But the pain is good, because he can feel it. On the rope, he was the pain, one had become the other. Now these pains are all over his body, but separate from him. He can struggle against them, try to ignore them, for a moment distract himself from them.

And through the pain, he can see the darkness overhead. It could be the sky on an overcast night. It could extend all the way to the clouds. He could be lying on a hill, a patch of grass. He might sit up, and see a city down below, the glow of its gates and towers. But he lays there, on the patch of grass, until pale and scattered light starts to reveal a low vault, and another next to it. Now he sits up—tries to. The move tightens the thorny vine. He is lying not on grass but rotting hay.

The ghostly figure of a man is standing with his back to Jacomo. His hands seem to be pressed against something, a surface, a wall. The light comes in through a grate recessed deeply in the wall above him. His hands pressed against the wall, the man is leaning his head into it, as though he is kissing it. He is sucking it. Sucking the wall.

The Angel of Ferrara

'Hello?'

The man continues sucking.

He is wearing a ragged serge gown, covered in embroidery of some sort.

'Hello?'

The man turns. His face is pale, long and drawn; his eyes are black holes. It could be hollow. Jacomo manages to get to his feet, and stagger towards him. As he gets close, the features become clearer, and are striking. A long nose slopes from a high brow, with a deep notch between eyes that are bulbous even in their deep sockets. The cheeks are sunken, the hair like ragged bristles on a rotting brush. He is tall. His gown is covered with filth, and has fallen open around his middle, revealing thin legs and withered privates in a nest of wiry grey hair.

'Who are you?' Jacomo asks. The man turns back to the wall, and continues to suck at it. A little closer, and Jacomo sees why: water trickles from the grate down the wall, and a thick cover of lichen grows out of the brickwork.

'Where am I? Where is this?' Jacomo asks.

The man turns again and wipes his face.

'The castle of his lordship Duke Alfonso.' Though weak and high-pitched, his voice is courtly.

He emits a loud, soft fart. 'Pardon me, messere,' he says. 'A slight disturbance of the intestine.' He bows stiffly. 'Sigismondo d'Este. That is me.'

'The duke's bastard cousin?'

Despite the description, Don Sigismondo smiles gently.

'Rightful Marquis of Massalombarda,' he corrects. 'Son of Francesco, grandson of Duke Alfonso, the first of that name, who was grandson of Ercole the Great...'

He walks on unsteady legs to the far corner of the cell, continuing to recite his lineage: 'Grandnephew of the Borso and Leonello, the sons of Nicolo the third, dukes of Ferrara.'

The Angel of Ferrara

Becoming used to the light, Giacomo sees a wooden pallet pushed up against the far wall, with a bundle of blankets on top of it. The duke's bastard cousin climbs into his tangled bedclothes and lies down on his back.

'And you?' he asks, after a pause.

'Me?'

'Yes, you, messere. Who are you?'

'No one.'

'Oh, you must be someone of consequence to enjoy the hospitality of my cousin's dungeons.'

There is a hatch near where Don Sigismondo lies. Giacomo inspects it.

'Where does this lead?' he asks, feeling the smooth timbers and iron rivets.

'What?' Sigismondo seems far away.

'The door.'

'Up to the castle courtyard.'

The plaster wall in which the hinges are fixed is crumbling with damp, but the rivets securing them run deep into stone. Next to the door is a pattern of black and white squares on the wall, like a gaming board. Further on, the wall leeches a soft white powder. Giacomo scrapes some of it off, and uses it to rub his hands clean.

He goes to the lichen, and starts to suck as Don Sigismondo had done. The water is cool and refreshing, but comes slowly.

Having to stand becomes painful, and he returns to where he had been lying. In a nook by one of the pillars holding up the ceiling vaults, he finds a pile of dank, stale straw. Keeping his movements gentle and slow so not to set off the pains, he gathers the straw up in his arms, and takes it over to a dry patch of floor, an arm's length from Sigismondo's bed. He shakes the straw out. A rat drops to the floor and runs off; another one, dead, just drops. He picks it up to see if would be edible, but it is a dried husk.

The Angel of Ferrara

He spreads out the straw and lies on it. He lets the pains settle, but some carry on. It is tiring, and he is spent, but they want to keep him awake.

‘Why are you in here, Don Sigismondo?’ he asks.

‘Where?’

He seems confused.

‘Here, in this dungeon.’

‘To be kept safe.’

‘Safe?’

‘For when my kinsman comes for me.’

‘Your kinsman?’

‘The duke.’

The poor man is mad.

Jacomo turns to him, the pain forcing a grunt.

‘Why would Duke Alfonso come for you?’

‘To declare me his heir, messere. When they realise that this marriage he has contracted, like the last two, and any in the future, will be unproductive.’

‘Give him a chance,’ Jacomo says. ‘The poor man has barely got his leg over.’

Sigismondo falls silent.

‘Excuse my baseness, signore,’ Jacomo adds, ‘It has been a bad day.’

But Sigismondo has turned away, and mumbles something to himself.

The water seems to have softened the pain a little. Perhaps the lichen has healing properties.

‘Does anyone come with food?’ Jacomo asks.

The question is met with faint chimes of the bells of the Torre di Rigobello. Footsteps pass by the grate. Somewhere outside, a wheel squeaks and a costermonger calls, the sounds becoming fainter.

The houses are draped in a glorious raiment of tapestries, streamers and bright sunshine. The street is crammed with happy citizens, waving flags, yelling their appreciation and delight. The procession passes beneath one of the triumphal arches erected for Margherita's entrance. A week's weather has left it a little tatty, but the inscription painted in gold along the cornicing is still to Filippo emblazoned with pertinency: FIDIE INCORRUPTAE INCONCUSSAE INCULPATAE—for a loyalty that is incorruptible, unshakeable and irreproachable.

And there, in the midst of this carnival of love sits his eminence, safe at last in the city, his home from Rome and Vatican affairs, resplendent in his long red velvet cloak trimmed with gold and his great, wide-brimmed galero, the one bought by his Uncle Ippolito, the tassels dancing as Don Luigi turns to look from one side of the street to the other in acknowledgement of the applause.

His balance on his donkey is precarious as the beast hobbles jerkily up the thoroughfare—the creature straining, perhaps, a little under some of Don Luigi's winter weight. Nevertheless, beneath the white satin baldachin carried with such military precision by his handsome escort of landsknechte—the finest Germany has to offer—he commands a glorious figure who, as even the most joyless heretic must concede, is as beloved by his flock as he is by his household.

The same could not be said of a group of courtiers who follow directly behind the cardinal's train, a gang of ill-disciplined, over-dressed cavalieri who have followed Don Luigi from Rome, presumably the latest encrustation of revellers who have managed to attach themselves to his eminence's generosity, and can be as difficult to lever off as limpets from a rock. Their youthful impudence leads them to flatter themselves the cause and object of the attention, certain debauched female members of the throng replying to the gentlemen's ribald appreciations by raising their skirts and baring their chests.

Filippo can only give thanks that cardinal is too far ahead to witness these boisterous antics.

A dark cloud spoils the blue sky, like a droplet of the blackest iron gall ink spreading out in a fresh pool. Filippo imagines the weight of water that might accumulate in the baldachin if the the cloud delivers what it threatens: enough surely to burst through the delicate gauze and deluge the cardinal.

The procession passes the San Rocco church, where the road narrows to such a degree that the escort is forced to pull behind the cardinal, and the rest of the cortege must walk two abreast. Filippo is gratified to see the cavalieri calm down, presumably daunted, as most men are, by their first sight, in the narrow slit where the street opens into the square, of the castle's massive, looming towers.

The procession pours from the street into the square like water through a sluice, and, as it spreads out, reveals the splendour at its centre, his eminence's cortège, glittering like a fish flecked with crimson and gold. The roar of approval from the vast throng lining the square is of such an intensity that Filippo finds his spirits lifting up in exaltation, up to the very parapets of the castle, above the rooftops of the Palazzo del Cortile, to some circuit of heaven from where he seems able to embrace in a glance the whole glorious, sublime wonder of Ferrara.

§

Jacomo is being shaken. It stirs up the pains. They rush around his body, biting and clawing his back and shoulders. The sensation makes him gasp, but the shaking continues. He grabs a bony wrist.

The face is a milky colour against the dungeon's dark vault. Two darker eyes, and the void of a mouth come into focus. Don Sigismondo's head trembles. His eyelids, as thin as the casing for a salami, are pulled wide. His eyeballs could drop from their sockets and into Jacomo's face. His lips, tightened by the lack of water, are drawn back to show rotting teeth and a tongue covered in ulcers. His breath is foul.

'You! You!' he is whispering urgently. 'Can you hear?'

He raises a finger, and cocks an ear towards the grate. Jacomo releases the bony wrist and sits up.

'Can you hear?'

The Angel of Ferrara

'Is a guard coming?' Jacomo asks.

Don Sigismondo frowns, wondering what he is talking about.

'Guard?'

'Doesn't someone come with food?' The hunger bites the stomach.

Don Sigismondo points to the grate.

The distant sound of a crowd's roar strikes it like a handful of gravel.

'There!' says Don Sigismondo.

The noise dies down for a few moments, then surges. The old man looks excited.

'See? Someone has come.'

He goes to the grate and listens. 'Don Francesco?' he wonders.

'Who?'

He hobbles back to Jacomo, his bowed legs spindly as a spider's, his knees sticking out sideways, his body rocking awkwardly from side to side with each step, like a man who has shit himself.

'The Grand Duke of Tuscany!' he says. 'Francesco de' Medici.' He seems desperate for Jacomo's interest. 'Come from Florence. To pay tribute to my lord Duke Alfonso!'

He returns to the grate and looks up at the light, listening intently. An officer can be heard shouting orders. 'Captain Tassone!' the don says. 'I can hear him.'

'So?'

'Come! Come!' He shakes a hand at Jacomo, who gets up and walks over to join him. The pains in his back are not so bad once he has begun to move.

'Mustering the guard, you see, all dressed up in their presentation livery, the Este arms emblazoned on their chests!'

Don Sigismondo starts to make a circuit of the cell, putting a finger to his lower lip as he paces. 'I could do business with Francesco,' he decides, talking to the ground. 'When the Pope made Tuscany a Grand Duchy, my cousin the duke was furious. Why not us, the Estes, scions of Troy? They were goatherds, the Medici, when we ruled

Milan! So why are we not Grand Dukes? Why did the Pope do this, raise them up above us? I was at the baptism of Francesco's son Filippo.' The old man gabbles his words. 'In Florence. Ostentatious, vulgar. But the impression, what a marvellous effect! That's the importance of splendour, you see, young man. Rule, assert, impose—dominate! Through the instruments of glorification. And no one, no one is better at glorification than the Medici.' Sigismondo is full of admiration. 'It pains me to admit it, but even we the Estes have much to learn from them.'

He comes to a halt, listening like a dog at the door, waiting for its master. Some other voices are heard, but too faint to make out the words.

'Signor Laderchi?' Don Sigismondo wonders. 'He will be at my cousin's shoulder, dripping treacherous poison into his ear.'

'Isn't this the cardinal?' Giacomo asks, remembering the fattore's mention of it.

'I beg your pardon?'

Giacomo listens for a moment.

'I heard the cardinal was arriving from Rome. To bless the marriage.'

Don Sigismondo comes to him.

'Luigi?' he asks.

'Yes, Don Luigi. So I believe.' The old man seems suddenly overcome with terror, which quickly turns into despair. 'Oh no!' he cries, slapping his bony thighs. 'Oh mercy! Oh the fires of hell come and consume me.'

'Don Sigismondo?'

But he has crumpled to the floor, and curls himself up, his knees to his chin, his hands cradling his head, a sobbing pile of rags and bones.

§

Don Luigi has lost the purchase of one of the stirrups. Filippo watches with horror as his eminence begins to lean to one side. A slow turn towards the line of courtiers waiting to greet him makes his eminence's angle even more acute. The saddle is slipping.

One of the landsknechte guards realises what is about to happen, and veers into towards the cardinal so his eminence can place a hand on his shoulder. His pike shakes slightly under the weight, causing the baldachin to loosen and flap a little, but the intervention allows his eminence to steady himself sufficiently to get his foot back in his stirrup.

By the time the cortege pulls up before the members of the duke's court, both the cardinal and his fretting factor have recovered their equilibrium.

A boy rushes forward with a mounting block—the wrong mounting block. It has the duke's heraldic emblems painted on the woodwork rather than the Crossed Keys of St Peter, as Filippo had originally arranged. Who made the change? Is it significant?

Master-Secretary Mosto steps up to receive his eminence. The cardinal swings back the flaps of his heavy cope, checks with his fingers the ornate clasp that secures it over his chest, and begins to dismount. The donkey looks restless at the shift of weight. Even Bastiano, the sturdy and loyal stable boy—well chosen by stablemaster Guarniero to act as footman—struggles to keep the creature steady, as the cardinal's pointed toe reaches tentatively towards the block. Mosto should surely offer his eminence a hand, but he hangs back, watching, as though it has nothing to do with him whether or not the cardinal slips and falls to the ground before his brother the duke's entire court. By the time a golden slipper securely connects with the painted step, Filippo finds the breath has not left his body for a while, and his urgent exhalation emerges as a sigh loud enough to attract the attention of the other staff members standing around him.

The donkey and the escort pull away, revealing Duke Alfonso, dressed as usual in sombre grey velvet, standing beneath the archway of the castle gate, ready to step forward to greet his brother. For now, his highness is looking down at his boots, as though peevish not to be the centre of the ceremonies going on around him.

A glance along the line reveals the ducal court to be properly represented: the chamberlain, the secretary of state, masters of the wardrobe, stables and chamber, the duke's chaplain, the officer of the ballots and captain of the guard.

Then, behind the line, among the crowds of aides and auxiliaries, above the row of heads, he sees an instantly recognisable bolt of fair hair. Donna Molza is heading Filippo's way.

Near where he is standing, where the minor courtiers are gathered, she emerges. A feeling like a ball of dough weighs in his stomach. He keeps his gaze locked on his eminence, pretending not to notice her.

The cardinal is being greeted by the castellan, who bows low, as he takes his eminence's hand and kisses a knuckle. His eminence murmurs something to him. The castellan stands back up, and nods solemnly.

An eye darts back in Donna Molza's direction. She appears to be staring directly at Filippo. He turns quickly away.

The duke is rocking on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back, making no effort to disguise his impatience at having to wait on his younger brother.

The cardinal begins to move along the line of nobles and dignitaries, nodding to those he recognises. He stops for a word with Laderchi.

A movement in the corner of the eye indicates Donna Molza is closer. It becomes apparent she is intent on speaking to him.

The cardinal is about to move towards the duke.

'Fattore,' she calls in a theatrical whisper over a shoulder.

He ignores her.

'Fattore?' she insists, in a louder voice. 'Please, we need to speak, concerning our mutual friend...'

Filippo sidles as inconspicuously as he can towards the landsknechte guards are standing.

'The unfortunate circumstances he now finds himself in,' she says, her voice now clearly audible to those standing around, 'restrained from performing certain enterprises - '

Filippo coughs into his fist. 'Madame, no,' he says.

The Angel of Ferrara

A man standing between them, a minor official in the duke's court, whose name Filippo forgets in this moment of crisis, looks quizzically over his shoulder at her.

'Donna Molza?' he whispers, amazed by her appearance, as though in answer to a dream. 'May I be of assistance?'

'Most gallant of you, signore.' Her voice is surely loud enough now to be heard by the cardinal. 'It is the fattore's help I need.' She points at Filippo. 'An urgent but confidential matter. That needs to be settled within the day.'

The official steps towards Filippo and tugs at his sleeve. 'Fattore?' he says.

'No, no,' Filippo mutters, trying to pull away.

But he collides into the shoulder of Alfonso Romei, the cardinal's master of the wardrobe, who, together with Niccolo Tassone, now stands next him, blocking his escape. The cardinal has turned, his attention caught by the disturbance. Beyond, the duke is also looking.

The dough ball drops into the lowest part of Filippo's bowels. The woman is pushing her way towards him.

He pulls back until he is clear of those around him, and walks quickly through the archways of the Via Coperta. He emerges to find himself confronted by the ranks of towns people lining the barrier the other side.

He turns towards the duke's palace. She is racing after him. He is just passing the water trough near the statue of Niccolo III when she grabs his cloak. He swings around to confront her.

'You lied to me,' he hisses.

'Lied?' The accusation pulls her up short.

'You told me the boy knew, you said he knew who his...about his, this father.' He stutters as he tries to find the words that will not give anything away to a group standing nearby, watching the confrontation with fascination. 'But he knows nothing about it, so he could not tell anyone.'

She reddens, confirming what the mason's widow had said.

The Angel of Ferrara

Emboldened by feelings of vindication, he leans in to her, almost brushes her cheek with his. 'So, this business no longer has anything to do with me or his eminence's household,' he whispers. 'You must look elsewhere for help.'

She clutches his arm. 'You would abandon him? Me?'

In the distance, through the archways of the Via Coperate, he can see Tassone is watching them. Others standing nearby glance over their shoulders. Filippo tries to tug himself free of her.

'You would abandon me?' she says in a louder voice.

The circle of interest is spreading, but her grip is tenacious.

'Please, Donna Molza!' he says, trying desperately to extract himself.

A man comes up from behind, one of the guards patrolling the crowd.

'He bothering you?' he asks Donna Molza.

'The fattore seems to be neglecting his obligations,' she declares.

In all directions, eyes are now on Filippo—the eyes of the guards, the eyes of the court, the eyes of the visitors, of the crowds, of the entire city...surely the eyes of the cardinal.

'Unhand me!' Filippo shouts at her in his shrillest voice.

She lets go.

Filippo backs away like a thief caught in the act. He turns. It is Filippo's back Ferrara watches flee into the cloth market, Filippo's back the whole world beholds hurtling into the jaws of despair.

What is History doing in Fiction?

A Practitioner's Perspective

Introduction

When Vladimir Nabokov was up for a chair in literature at Harvard, the linguist Roman Jakobson protested: ‘Gentlemen, even if one allows that he is an important writer, are we next to invite an elephant to be Professor of Zoology?’ (Boyd 1993: 303). The joke was revealing—literary culture is like the animal kingdom, writers part of its fauna, their acts to be observed by experts from a critical distance.

What, then, can authors say about literature? Does their role in creating it give them any kind of privileged insight into its production? The Booker-Prize winning critic and novelists A. S. Byatt apparently thought not. ‘I have never taught “creative writing”,’ she declared in 2000. ‘I think I see teaching good reading as the best way of encouraging, and making possible, good writing.’ (Byatt 2000: 1)

But when it comes to creating works that draw on scholarly research (in particular, historical research) as well as personal experience, imagination and literary connoisseurship, Byatt adjusts her view. While ‘it is customary for writer-academics to claim a kind of schizoid personality, and state that their research [...] has nothing to do with their work as makers of fiction’, she thinks it is ‘dangerous to disintegrate’ in this way. Hence, in her lecture ‘True Stories and the Facts in Fiction’, she felt it productive to explain ‘the relations of precise scholarship and fiction’ by examining the choice and uses of the historical sources she drew upon in the writing of her short stories ‘Morpho Eugenia’ and ‘The Conjugal Angel’. (Byatt 2000: 92)

This critical component of my PhD thesis follows her example. When it comes to knowing what and how ‘precise scholarship’ is used in a piece of creative writing, whether it is fiction or history, being a good reader is not enough. For this reason, the focus is on the practitioner: how writers combine history with fiction in the creation of their works.

I will concentrate on mostly Anglophone authors who have influenced my own writing, and who in one way or another reveal the operations of historical research in the construction of their works.

The first chapter will consider the issue from the point of view of the novelist. I will look at my own experiences of writing the creative component of this thesis, and at the work of other historical novelists who have helped shape my own writing.

The second chapter will switch to the historian's perspective, looking at whether novelistic techniques such as storytelling and focalisation enhance or undermine historical authority.

The conclusion will attempt to expose the similarities and the differences between the two forms of writing (historical and fictional) with the aim of finding out if the border between the two is really as porous as is sometimes assumed, and what this says about the role of history in fiction.

Historical Fiction

History and fiction in their modern forms have grown up together, but historians and philosophers of history, as well as literary critics, generally treat the mixing of the two with suspicion if not disdain. Yet, since Sir Walter Scott invented the modern form, the historical novel has thrived.*

The first chapter will begin with an assessment of the genre, focusing on one of its defining features: the 'paratext', the prefaces, author notes or acknowledgements that signal a work's historical credentials. I will survey how much and how little these paratexts tell us about the scholarship used, and what they reveal about the authors' motives for drawing upon it, which range from filling the gaps in the historical record to bearing witness to lives neglected by posterity.

I will then attempt to construct a comprehensive and candid paratext for the creative component of my PhD, the historical novel *The Angel of Ferrara*, examining in detail what, how and why history was used in the work. I will identify the sorts of sources I drew upon, noting their type and quality and the reasons for my selection. I will try to

* Jane West seems to have given the genre its English name, in the title of her 1812 Civil War novel *The Loyalists: An Historical Novel* (see Hamnett 2011: 72), but most studies accept Scott's primacy, starting with Hugh Walpole's early critical history, published to commemorate the centenary of the author's death (Fleishman 1972 p.xv).

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follow the traces of these sources through the work, and consider their impact on the story. I will note where I have been faithful to the sources, and where I have ignored or changed them, and assess the reasons. I will also consider the issue of what sort of language to use, whether antiquated or modern, foreign or familiar.

Having looked at the uses of history in my own fictional work, I will try to get beyond the paratextual veil to explore the practices of other novelists, focusing on Hilary Mantel, who has been more revealing than most about her uses of research. I will look at her approach to the creation of Thomas Cromwell in her Tudor novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, and attempt to reverse engineer some of the books' scenes, to bring to the fore the history embedded in the narrative and see what she has done with it.

Mantel's portrait of Cromwell is so compelling, so convincing, the question arises: does it tell us something about the historical figure? Can verisimilitude reach such an intensity, it becomes a kind of truth?

The answer, according to Simon Schama, seems to be no, or perhaps yes. In a preface to a second edition of his one work of fiction—two, loosely connected novellas published under the title *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*—he was perplexed by the confusion of some critics over the work's fictional status. It had been misrepresented as some sort of intervention into the debate over the 'sure attainability of objective truth', to which he responded: 'Keep your hair on, it's fiction, two novellas about history, not history itself.'

I will end the chapter by considering the deep cultural anxiety aroused by the mixing of fact with fiction, and the celebrated historian's not altogether successful efforts to deal with the issue, to distinguish the 'inventive faculty' that forms an inevitable part of even the 'most austere scholarly report' with the products—as he claimed *Dead Certainties* to be—of 'pure invention'. (Schama 2013 np)

Fictional History

The contrast sometimes made between works of fiction and nonfiction is that one is about uncertainty and ambiguity while the other concerns what is fixed and known. When it comes to history, however, the distinction does not seem so clear. History is a

discourse of doubt. It thrives on imagination, speculation and mystery as much as matters of fact. The second chapter will examine this aspect of writing history from the historian's perspective, how historians 'are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness', as Schama put it, and whether this results in a blurring of the borderline between what they and novelists produce. (Schama 2013 np)

Savage Kingdom, my non-fiction account of the settlement of Jamestown, England's first colonial foothold in North America, included a passage dealing with the famous story of Pocahontas, the daughter of a local Indian chief, saving the life of the colonist Captain John Smith. The historical sources available to reconstruct the episode were from a single dubious source, and heavily mediated by more recent tellings, notably by Disney. This made any hope of a definitive account impossible. In a way, the whole episode was originally presented as a kind of fiction, so should a historian not treat it as such? I will discuss my own efforts to deal with this episode through a shift of narrative perspective considered 'meticulously-plotted' by one reviewer but roundly condemned for 'papering over critical historical questions' by another.

I will also examine how I wrote about the Virginian Indians. Their language and culture has been extinct for centuries, so I drew on the stories recorded by the colonists to recreate the sort of oral history that the Indians might have told about themselves. This attempt proved to be a delicate and difficult task, but one I felt was essential to give the natives of Virginia a voice in an account of the English colonial venture.

I will then look at how other historians deal with such issues, specifically Luise White in *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* and Barbara Hanawalt in *Growing Up in the Middle Ages*. (Hanawalt 1993) Without embarking on a more general survey of the large body of literature about the nature of orality and its impact on notions of authority and truth, I will draw on these historians' innovative use of fictional techniques and devices to explore the poorly-documented worlds of the colonised, the dispossessed, the poor and the powerless—to, as Hanawalt put it, 'redress an imbalance in the records'. (Hanawalt 1993: ix)

I will end this section with a survey of the genre that attempts the most complete blending of nonfiction with fiction, research with story—what Truman Capote,

describing his masterpiece *In Cold Blood*, boldly styled the 'nonfiction novel'. I will assess what he, along with that other champion of the genre Norman Mailer, were trying to achieve. I will consider whether, by making themselves absent from the narrative, they achieved the 'objectivity' they and their supporters claimed, whether factual errors and invention compromised the works or simply reflected their novelistic status, whether the use of artistic techniques to tell a compelling story can be seen as evidence of it being true.

Fiction and History

The historiographer Hayden White argued that, among historians, 'in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are—verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences'. (Hayden White 1985: 82, author's emphasis) The final chapter will assess this claim from a more theoretical-critical perspective, and consider its implications for the historian and historical novelist.

Ironically, the tool that many critics have adopted to address the relationship between history and its 'counterparts in literature' is history. Though it threatens to become destructively recursive, the history of history is an established intellectual endeavour ('historiography') and, in the case of the development of modern history and realist fiction as forms of literature, has proved productive. It has revealed how modern fiction and history co-evolved, how fictional discourse came to define its factual counterpart and vice versa, in the process each freeing itself of the other's constraints, allowing the flourishing of the great narrative histories and realist novels of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent emergence of history and literary criticism as separate disciplines. (Gallagher 2006)

But in recent decades, this comfortable cohabitation has become strained, at least from a literary-critical perspective, as the rise of a poststructuralist body of theory has questioned the underlying convention that assumes a fact/fiction polarity. 'Narrative structure,' wrote Barthes, 'which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction [...] becomes at once the sign and the proof of reality.' (Quoted in de Groot

2009: 110) Reality, he and others argued, is an effect, not a fact, an aesthetic rather than objective quality; created, not discovered.

Novels that fall into the awkwardly named category 'historiographic metafiction' — works such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*—are seen as a literary response of this idea, and I will look at a recent example, Laurent Binet's 2012 prize-winning novel *HHhH*, to examine what such works tell us about the difference between fact and fiction. Binet's book tries to tell the true story of an assassination attempt on a member of the Nazi elite, while a parallel commentary explores his anxiety that the 'bright and blinding veneer of fiction' might hide the reality of an important historical event. (Binet 2012: 4) I will look at how Binet dramatised this struggle through his metafictional techniques.

My first book, *Virtual Worlds* (1992), was originally commissioned as a chronicle of the technological fad of 'virtual reality', the idea that computers could be used to simulate worlds so realistic they would be indistinguishable from reality. However, researching and writing the book at the height of the poststructuralist boom in the early 1990s resulted in a wider cultural survey of the notion of reality in an increasingly artificial world.

One of the themes that emerged was the persistence of the notion of reality. Whether an aesthetic construct or not, it continues to thrive in the domain of science. Indeed, it has in some subjects, notably physics and cosmology, widened to embrace not just what is actual but what is possible (or virtual), on the basis that, in an infinite universe, everything that can exist does so. A literary analogy might be Borges's notion of the Library of Babel—a library that contains every possible, intelligible text, including 'the Gnostic gospel of Basillides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death.' (Borges 1987: 81-82)

Though positivist notions of scientific truth are in many respects the antithesis of postmodern humanism, I will end the thesis with a tentative suggestion that adapting this conception of the real to the domain of the humanities might help us to make more sense of what history is doing in fiction, and how the one interacts with the other. The idea is inspired, ironically, by Hayden White, the champion of postmodern historiography. Echoing the comparison of literature to finance, he used a gambling

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analogy: 'Historical discourse,' he wrote, 'wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real.' (Hayden White 2005: 147)

Historical Fiction

In his study of the genre, Jerome de Groot observed: 'It might be a rule of thumb to define the historical novel as something which has an explanatory note from the writer describing their own engagement with the period in question.' De Groot characterised these as 'paratextual commentaries' (de Groot 2009: 6, 8)

The concept of the paratext was introduced by the French structuralist critic Gerard Genette, who came up with a whole menagerie of textual entities that roam the 'fringes and borderlands' of literary works. He saw them as part of the apparatus of the book, existing to 'present' a text, 'in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book'. He identified two subspecies of paratext, the 'peritext' and 'epitext'. The peritext comprises those textual elements that are 'around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance,' such as the title or preface. The epitext comprises those more 'distanced' elements—interviews, 'conversations', private and public communications, that surround the text's publication. Genette's purpose was to show how no text appears 'naked', that its paratext is its literal and vital context, helping to shape how it is read. What, for example, would reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* be like if it was not called *Ulysses*? (Genette 1997 pp.xix, 1, 4-5, 83)

In the case of the historical novel, paratexts—more specifically, peritexts, though the effusions in the public presses of historical novelists from Scott to Mantel suggest epitexts as well—have a particular prominence. They go far beyond exploiting the intertextual resonances of a title. They are often lengthy, elaborate productions by authors self-consciously struggling to justify the presence of the history in the fiction, as though the one does not naturally belong in the other.

The pattern is established early on in the genre's development, indeed in the work usually seen as the first modern example, *Waverley*.

In an introduction to the first edition, Walter Scott, writing anonymously (following the convention of the time), pondered at some length about his intentions in the

production of the work, beginning with a meditation on his choice of another paratextual entity, the subtitle, "Tis sixty years since'. The 'election' of this 'supplementary title', he explained, should be considered a 'pledge' by the anonymous author—a daring one, he implies—to a 'special mode of laying his scene, drawing his characters, and managing his adventures'. This 'special mode' related to the 'author's' invocation of the past:

By fixing, then, the date of my story Sixty Years before this present 1st November, 1805, I would have my readers understand, that they will meet in the following pages neither a romance of chivalry nor a tale of modern manners; that my hero will neither have iron on his shoulders, as of yore, nor on the heels of his boots, as is the present fashion of Bond Street; and that my damsels will neither be clothed 'in purple and in pall,' like the Lady Alice of an old ballad, nor reduced to the primitive nakedness of a modern fashionable at a rout. From this my choice of an era the understanding critic may farther presage that the object of my tale is more a description of men than manners. (Scott 1814: 7)

In other words, Scott was declaring the invention of a new kind of novel and invoking 'this present 1st November, 1805' signalled its character. The date marked the sixtieth anniversary to the day that Charles Edward Stuart, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', left Edinburgh at the head of an army intending to invade England and restore the Stuart dynasty to the British throne.

The earliest reviews picked up on the subtitle's significance, and were sensitive to the literary, political, historical and even gender implications behind it. In one of the earliest notices, in the *Monthly Review*, the anonymous reviewer clearly appreciated the work's historical basis, noting how the fictional episodes and characters were 'subservient to a most spirited and accurate narrative of the military operations of the [Stuart] Pretender and his adherents'. The reviewer also pointed out that the book would 'probably disappoint all those readers who take it up at a circulating library, selecting it at random from amid sundry tomes of *Emmeline*, *Castel Gandolpho*, *Elegant Enthusiasts* and *Victims of Sensibility*', frivolous works associated with a predominantly female readership. (Anon 1814: 279-80)

The subtitle and introduction thus established *Waverley* as a manly production inspired by fact.

As proof of this, the reviewer noted, 'not with a view to disparage the author of this superior performance but by way of complement to our own sagacity [...] that most of the descriptions of local manners and customs, and some strong touches of character' were to be found in a 1754 publication called *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friends in London*. (280) Scott acknowledged as much in a third edition of the novel, produced the same year in a desperate effort to keep up with the book's phenomenal sales. Adding yet more layers of peritextual adornment, he provided a preface to the introduction responding to criticisms that he had 'borne hard, and unjustly so' upon the 'national character' of Highlanders. 'Nothing could be further from [the author of *Waverley*'s] wish or intention,' the preface protested. 'Those who have perused the curious Letters from the Highlanders [...] will find instances of such atrocious characters, which fell under the writer's own observation.' (Scott 1814: viii-ix)

By the time of the 1829 'Magnum Opus' edition, serving a now international craving for a series of works that ran to 48 volumes, the peritexts had proliferated to include a dedication to the king, an 'advertisement' about corrections and a lengthy 'General Preface' complete with several appendices. The purpose of the General Preface was ostensibly to justify the decision of the now famous 'author of *Waverley*' to maintain his anonymity or 'secrecy' even after the success of the books 'to the amount of betwixt eleven and twelve thousand copies'—a justification somewhat undermined by the royal dedication, which included a very legible reproduction of Scott's signature. (Scott 1829: xxi-ii)

Many books published at the time were anonymous—Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, for example, which appeared the same year as *Waverley*. She felt no obligation to explain the concealment of her name. The only peritext within the covers of *Mansfield Park* is a title page, which states that the novel is 'by the author of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*'. The reader then turns the page, and the story begins. (Austen 1814)

So, what prompted Scott to labour on the issue in a preamble that takes up a sixth of the first volume of the Magnum Opus edition? His justifications were multifarious, inconsistent and unconvincingly coy. They included avoiding the 'habits of self-

importance which are...acquired by authors', claiming that 'there was scarce any degree of literary success which could have greatly altered or improved my personal condition' and because 'the mental organization of the Novelist must be characterised, so to speak craniologically, by an extraordinary development of the passion for delitescency'—in modern terms, novelists are hard-wired for anonymity. (Scott 1824: ii, xxi-xxii, xxvi) Such tortuous explanations are hard to read as more than a canny acknowledgement that a policy originally adopted for reasons of convention had become a useful instrument of publicity. The Scottish author and judge Henry Cockburn evidently suspected as much: 'If the concealment of authorship of the novels was intended to make mystery heighten their effect, it completely succeeded. The speculations and conjectures, and nods and winks, and predictions and assertions were endless, and occupied every company, and almost every two men who met and spoke on the street.' (quoted in Bautz 2007: 55)

There may, however, have been another motive at work, peculiar to the genre Scott had helped to invent.

As part of his peritextual manifesto for authorial anonymity, Scott provided what might least be expected: an autobiographical sketch. As a boy, he wrote,

...the chief enjoyment of my holidays was to escape with a chosen friend, who had the same taste with myself, and alternately to recite to each other such wild adventures as we were able to devise. We told, each in turn, interminable tales of knight-errantry and battles and enchantments, which were continued from one day to another as opportunity offered, without our ever thinking of bringing them to a conclusion. (Scott 1824 p.vi)

This apprenticeship as tale-teller was developed into adulthood by a long illness, which intervened 'as if it were by a species of fatality'. Prevented from working, he took advantage of a 'circulating library in Edinburgh...which, besides containing a most respectable collection of books of every description, was, as might have been expected, peculiarly rich in works of fiction'—the sorts of works derided by the critic in the *Monthly Review*. The predominance of fiction reflected the priorities of these private precursors to the public library, which were commercial enterprises reliant on subscription fees. 'I plunged into this great ocean of reading without compass or pilot,' the 'author of Waverley' continued, which resulted in him reading 'almost all the

romances, old plays, and epic poetry' available. Thus, he learned the arts of fiction-writing in its various forms.

However,

At the same time I did not in all respects abuse the licence permitted me. Familiar acquaintance with the specious miracles of fiction brought with it some degree of satiety, and I began, by degrees, to seek in histories, memoirs, voyages and travels, and the like, events nearly as wonderful as those which were the work of imagination, with the additional advantage that they were at least in a great measure true. (Scott 1824: vi)

Through this vignette, the 'author of Waverley' seemed to be meditating on the peculiar role of authorship in a work that combines elements of fiction with nonfiction. He characterises the former almost as a form of pornography, its 'abuse' providing 'specious miracles' outside the 'respectable' collection of the library. This reflected views widespread in the literary elite at the time. The classicist, traveller and aesthete J. B. S. Morritt, who received a presentation copy of *Waverley*, referred with obvious disgust to the 'the thousand and one annual abortions of the circulating library,' and congratulated his friend on producing a work devoid of 'the slipshod, sauntering verbiage of common novels', and of the 'stiff, precise and prim sententiousness of some of our female moralists'. (Garside 1991: 30)

Such attitudes had their roots in the Scottish Enlightenment, which established the intellectual climate of Scott's era and work. (See Garside 1975) In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-lettres*, for example, the economist Adam Smith claimed 'newness' to be 'the only merit in a Novel, and curiosity the only motive which induces us to read them.' Histories, on the other hand, narrated 'the more important facts and those which were most concerned in bringing about great revolutions, and unfolding their causes, to instruct their readers in what manner such events might be brought about or avoided'. (Adam Smith 1983: 97, 111)

But there are sly indications that the 'author of Waverley' was not fully enrolled with the Enlightenment project, in particular its privileging of the factual over the fictional. The author's description of the 'histories, memoirs, voyages and travels' he had read in the circulating library as being only in 'great measure' true surely contains a hint of

irony. And he clearly identified his early 'wild adventures' into the realms of fable as formative in his development as a writer.

In a dedicatory epistle, one of the peritexts for his 1820 medieval Romance *Ivanhoe*, Scott explored this theme further. The letter was written by one Laurence Templeton of a quaintly-named estate called Toppingwold, near Egremont in Cumberland, to the antiquarian the Rev. Dr Dryasdust of York. Maintaining the distinctive ironic tone of Scott's other peritexts, Templeton referred obliquely to the author of *Waverley* in connection with the certain works, 'which, whatever other merit they possess, must be admitted to be...in violation of every rule assigned to the epopeia'—Scott's four novels preceding *Ivanhoe*, in other words, which could only be considered vulgar entertainments, incapable of achieving the transcendent literary effects of epic poetry. (Scott 1820: v) Whatever 'art' such works possessed lay in the use by the anonymous author 'of stores of antiquity which lay scattered around him, supplying his own indolence or poverty of invention...introducing real characters, and scarcely suppressing real names.' By drawing on this 'mine' of material, 'it was no wonder [the author of *Waverley*] should have derived his works fully more credit and profit than the facility of his labour merited.' (vii)

Templeton then declared that he intends to do the same with the 'traditions and manners of Old England'—that what the author of *Waverley* did for Jacobite Scotland and Rob Roy, he would do for Plantagenet England and Robin Hood.

However, Dryasdust had apparently already pointed out a fatal weakness in this enterprise: that, while the author of *Waverley* (referred to as 'the Scotsman' and, later, 'the Scottish magician') could draw on 'the very recent existence of that state of society in which his scene was to be laid', Templeton would have to rely on 'musty records and chronicles' going back to the twelfth century, 'the authors of which seem perversely to have conspired to suppress in their narratives all interesting details, in order to find room for flowers of monkish eloquence, or trite reflections upon morals'. (ix)

Templeton dismissed this objection with a shrug. Having reprised Dryasdust's concerns at some length (the reverend had apparently raised them during an earlier encounter), he declared himself confident he would find 'hints concerning the private life of our

ancestors' in whatever 'slender proportion' was to be had, 'and therefore I protest, beforehand, against any argument which may be founded in the failure of the present experiment'. (xiii-xiv)

Templeton then considered concerns 'more peculiar to myself'—to an author of historical fiction.

He first addressed the issue that 'the very office of an antiquary, employed in grave, and, as the vulgar would sometimes allege, in minute and trivial research, must be considered as incapacitating him from successfully compounding a tale of this sort.' He accepted this risk, observing how Horace Walpole, an indefatigable collector, had managed to produce 'a goblin tale which has thrilled many a bosom' (Walpole's 1764 *Castle of Otranto*, the model of the Gothic novel). (xv)

But there was a graver concern: that, 'by...intermingling the fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe.' Templeton responded by pointing out that some element of translation is inevitable in such a work if it is to excite 'interest of any kind' (a position Lukács echoed with the notion of the 'necessary anachronism' in historical fiction—see below p.271). As an example, Templeton cited Antoine Galland's first European translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, 'in which, retaining on the one hand the splendour of eastern costume, and on the other the wildness of eastern fiction, he mixed these with just so much ordinary feeling and expression, as rendered them interesting and intelligible, while he abridged the long-winded narratives, curtailed the monotonous reflections, and rejected the endless repetitions of the Arabian original'. (xvii)

Finally, Templeton accepted historical errors would arise in the work, but 'it is my comfort that errors of this kind will escape the general class of readers', suggesting that the story's historical validity was otherwise irrelevant. (xxvii)

In other words, while Scott seemed to accept dryasdust scholarship to be an essential element of the historical novel, what mattered most was the author's capabilities as a writer of fiction, drawing on the exercise of the imagination to render 'interesting and

intelligible' those episodes in distant times and places that would otherwise remain obscure.

Scott's peritexts are in many respects as important to understanding the nature of the genre he helped invent as the texts themselves. Through his ingenious exploitation of the conventions of anonymity and pseudonymity as devices to give him ironical distance from the fiction, he opened up the peritextual space through which authors of future historical novels could explore the complex issues invoked by this 'special mode' of storytelling, in particular the challenge of balancing authority with art.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton demonstrated the importance of Scott's legacy in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1836), his first and most successful historical novel. Publishing the book under the name of 'the author of "Pelham"', his 1828 'silver fork' novel of manners, he included a preface that stated in bolder terms what Scott had explored through the more refractive lens of irony. Citing the preface to Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Bulwer-Lytton declared:

As the greatest difficulty in treating of an unfamiliar and distant period is to make the characters introduced 'live and move' before the eye of the reader, so such should doubtless be the first object in a work of this description:- and *all attempts at the display of learning ought to be considered but as means subservient to this the main requisite of fiction*. The first art of the Poet (the Creator) is to breathe the breath of life into his creatures—the next is to make their words and actions appropriate to the era in which they are to speak and act. This last art is perhaps the better effected by not bringing the art itself constantly before the reader—by not crowding the page with quotations and the margin with notes. Perpetual references to learned authorities have, in fiction, something at once wearisome and arrogant. They appear like the Author's eulogies on his own accuracy and his own learning—they do not serve to elucidate his meaning but to parade his erudition. *The intuitive spirit which infuses antiquity into ancient images is, perhaps, the true learning which a work of this nature requires*—without it, pedantry is offensive; with it, useless. No man who is thoroughly aware of what Prose Fiction has now become, of its dignity—of its influence—of the manner in which it has gradually absorbed all similar departments of literature—of its power in teaching as well as amusing—can so far forget its connexion with History—with Philosophy—with Politics—its utter harmony with Poetry, and obedience to Truth as to debase its nature to the level of scholastic frivolities; he raises scholarship to the creative and does not bow the creative to the scholastic. (Bulwer-Lytton 1834 p.v, emphasis added)

Thus, barely two decades after the self-deprecating 'Templeton' dared suggest that the novelist might have a case for drawing on history to supply 'his own indolence or poverty of invention', Bulwer-Lytton was bullishly proclaiming that the dignity, influence, reach and educational value of the poet's 'intuitive spirit' to be such that it should trump the demands of scholarship—that authority must yield to art.

Authors duly began to make increasingly free with scholarship, to such an extent that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the genre was widely denigrated. (See for example Battles 2009: 215) William Harrison Ainsworth, a protégé of Scott's and author of 'Newgate novels', came to embody the hack historical novelist, caricatured in *Punch* magazine as the 'Greatest Axe-and-Neck Romancer', dressed in Tudor costume, the handle of an axe resting against his knee, dagger in one hand and in the other a huge quill with 'Romance' written across the feather. (*Punch*, 24 September 1881, p.135)

Ainsworth in fact identified what must have been a growing mood of weariness with the self-consciousness expressed in peritexts. In a preface to the second edition of his first novel *Rookwood*, he proclaimed that he was 'no great lover of prefaces' which he looked upon as a 'matter of supererogation'—though he then proceeded to supererogate to the tune of six tightly-printed pages in which he cheerfully admitted that Dick Turpin, the main character, though historical, was 'a pure invention of my own' and that the book's most famous episode, Turpin's implausible 200-mile overnight ride from London to York on his horse Black Bess, was not based on serious historical research as there was 'nothing beyond oral tradition to go upon'. (Ainsworth 1834: 3-4)

As in Scott's time, however, it was the women who were seen as the principle agents of declining standards, both as dilettante producers and indiscriminate consumers. Leading the way in heaping opprobrium was an article in the *Westminster Review*, published in 1856. 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,' the author wrote, quoting the article's title, 'are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic.' The species identified as being least readable was 'the *modern-antique*'. Among its examples the critic found 'ladies constantly choosing to make their mental mediocrity

more conspicuous, by clothing it in a masquerade of ancient names; by putting their feeble sentimentality into the mouths of Roman vestals or Egyptian princesses, and attributing their rhetorical powers to Jewish high-priests and Greek philosophers.’ A typical example of this ‘heavy imbecility’ was *Adonijah, a Tale of the Jewish Dispersion* (1856) by Jane Margaret Strickland (1800–1888), sister of the historian Agnes. ‘Instead of being written in plain language,’ this production was ‘adorned in that peculiar style of grandiloquence which is held my some lady novelists to give an antique colouring’. (Eliot 1856: 243, 253)

The author of this diatribe was George Eliot, (see Henry 2013: 35-6) and, for her, the problem was not the gender of the novelists she had so caustically reviewed—‘Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men’—but their approach to writing as a profession. She despaired that ‘there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery’. ‘For it must be plain to every one who looks impartially and extensively into feminine literature, that its greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art.’ (254). And this ‘art’, in Eliot’s view, was peculiarly demanding when it came to historical fiction:

Admitting that genius which has familiarised itself with all the relics of an ancient period can sometimes, by force of its sympathetic divination, restore the missing notes in the “music of humanity,” and reconstruct the fragments into a whole which will really bring the remote past nearer to us, and interpret it to our duller apprehension,—this form of imaginative power must always be among the very rarest, because it demands as much accurate and minute knowledge as creative vigour. (253)

In some respects, Eliot was recasting the novelist’s use of the ‘relics’ of scholarship not as a right of exploitation, such as that of a prospector digging nuggets of gold from an exposed seam, but an obligation to a higher aesthetic cause.

Seven years after the publication of the *Westminster Review* article, Eliot made her own attempt at capturing this very rare ‘genius’ with her only work to fall squarely into the ‘species’ of historical novel, *Romola*. Set in Florence in the period directly following

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the death of the Tuscan potentate Lorenzo de' Medici and the rise of the charismatic preacher Savonarola, the novel tells the story of Romola, the daughter and amanuensis of the blind scholar Bardo de' Bardi. She marries the Greek Tito Melema, a shipwreck survivor who arrives in Florence seeking to recover his fortunes. As her husband flourishes, Romola becomes increasingly aware of his unscrupulous nature and struggles to reconcile her sacred marriage vows with a growing realisation that he is unworthy of them. This personal struggle mirrors the political one underway in Florence at the time, between the comforts of sticking with a corrupt church and the dangers of Savonarola's reforming zeal, discovering 'where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins.' (Eliot 1993: 462)

Writing *Romola* had obviously been a struggle for Eliot. Three years before its publication, she wrote to her publisher, 'Mr. Lewes has encouraged me to persevere in the project, saying that I should probably do something in historical romance rather different in character from what has been done before.' Her publisher flatteringly responded that he was sure 'you have such a power of imparting reality to every thing you write that your Romance will not read like Fiction. I expect that you will return Historical Romance to its ancient popularity'. (Quoted in Battles 2009: 216)

She did indeed 'do something rather different in character', as demonstrated in the novel's peritextual commentary. Unlike Scott and his followers, she begins *Romola* not with an introduction or preface but rather a 'Proem'—an archaic term associated with the works of Dante and Boccaccio. The narrator of the proem is not the author—anonymous, actual or fictional. Instead, the discreet voice of a sort of Virgilian guide emerges, acting as an intermediary between the reader's time and the past.

The proem's narration begins 'in the mid spring-time of 1492' suspended high above the world, looking down upon it alongside the 'angel of the dawn' (in early drafts, the 'star-quenching angel'). The angel is followed as he passes across Europe, from the Levant to the Pillars of Hercules, seeing the same 'great mountain shadows on the same valleys' as in the reader's time, and the same 'domes and spires of cities rising by the river-sides or mingled with the sedge-like masts on the many-curved sea-coast, in the same spots where they rise to-day'. In other words, it is a scene of continuity. And humanity is part of this continuity: 'we are impressed with the broad sameness of the

human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history--hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death.' (Eliot 1993: 3)

As the angel continues his westerly progress, 'our imagination pauses on a certain historical spot and awaits the fuller morning', which reveals a 'world-famous city': Florence. It stands 'as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ them, as the great mechanical principles on which those domes and towers were raised must make a likeness in human building that will be broader and deeper than all possible change'

Then the point of view abruptly shifts, plummeting to earth, to the perspective of a 'shade', the resurrected spirit of a Florentine citizen, gazing at the scene as the reader might, several centuries after 'his eyes last closed' on the city. He beholds it again from 'the famous hill of San Miniato' and marvels at how familiar it is so many centuries later, that it might even be possible 'to descend once more amongst the streets, and take up that busy life where he left it'. But then he begins to notice differences. The Franciscan church of San Croce has acquired an incongruous new bell tower. 'If it had been built in my day,' he observes, 'Filippo Brunelleschi or Michelozzo would have devised something of another fashion than that—something worthy to crown the church of Arnolfo [Arnolfo di Cambio, the original architect of Santa Croce].'

Discomfited by this, he notices that the city's walls have lost 'five out of the eleven convenient gates' and the defences that had once 'encircled the city as with a regal diadem'. This mystifies him:

Is the world become so peaceful, then, and do Florentines dwell in such harmony, that there are no longer conspiracies to bring ambitious exiles home again with armed bands at their back? (5)

Recalling his own times as a merchant and official, he begins to consider what else might have changed: Florence's elaborate system of governance? Its trade? Even its religion? Savonarola's preachings, after all, had been prophetic. 'How,' the spirit wonders, 'has it all turned out?'

He decides to go down 'to the streets below, on the beloved *marmi* in front of the churches, and under the sheltering Loggie' to find out, but the poem's narrator urges

him not to, 'for the changes are great and the speech of Florentines would sound as a riddle in your ears'. (8-9)

L. P. Hartley's famous epigram about the past being a foreign country is reversed by Eliot's narrator—the present has become foreign, and the challenge for the historical novelist is in finding out why, discovering the operation of political and theological forces that sweep through history as the angel of the dawn sweeps across the world. 'These are difficult questions,' the narrator warns; 'it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new.' (5)

Eliot's unorthodox choice of peritextual commentary in part reflects the novel's mode of publication. *Romola*, unlike Scott's *Waverley*, but like most fiction of the high Victorian era, was written to be published in serial form, appearing in *Cornhill Magazine* in fourteen monthly parts between July 1862 and August 1863. Eliot had not even settled the volume rights when *Cornhill's* publisher, Smith, Elder & Co, paid her the extraordinary sum of £7,000 to serialise the work (by way of comparison, the likes of Trollope, Bulwer-Lytton and Thackeray were receiving between £1,000 and £2,100 for the serial rights to their works). The generous offer had evidently concentrated Eliot's mind on how to set up her sophisticated historicist agenda at the beginning of a work that must plunge the magazine reader as quickly as possible into its imaginative world. Clearly, any sort of historical or philosophical treatise on sources or approach, or even the sort of playful authorial masquerading undertaken by Scott, might act as a barrier at the delicate and vital moment when a reader engages with the story. (xxviii-xxx)

But the proem also acted as an ingenious way of highlighting the profound and ambitious issues Eliot was hoping to embrace in the novel, specifically the relationship of continuity and change over historical time, the idea that identifying changes in what each generation considers immutable and eternal, rather than ephemeral and fashionable, is the basis of the most insightful and compelling history.

In this regard, the proem might be thought of as more successful than the book it introduced. *Romola* garnered generally poor reviews. The critic of the *Saturday Review*, writing soon after the volume edition came out, noted that 'the authoress has been tempted into a field where...her merits are obscured, and their effect impaired.

She has left the description and study of English life, and has attempted to overcome the difficulties of the historical novel.’ (Anon 1863: 124) Leslie Stephen dismissed it as a ‘magnificent piece of cram’ (‘cram’, the verb as well as the noun, was his term of choice when it came to historical fiction, applied to Scott, among others). The ‘masses of information’, Stephen complained, were not ‘fused by a glowing imagination’; ‘the fuel has put out the fire.’ (Stephen 1926: 212)

Though the historical novel continued to thrive during the high Victorian and early Edwardian periods, the legacy of Scott’s and Eliot’s peritextual daring became neglected, almost as if the literary world had given up trying to make sense of the genre’s peculiarities and potentialities, being content to feed a hungry readership. The issues the ‘author of Waverley’ and the angel of dawn had been used to illuminate remained as obscure as ever, and authors seemed reluctant to deal with them except in the most rudimentary manner. A case in point is Thomas Hardy’s 1880 novel set in the era of the Napoleonic wars, *The Trumpet-Major*. Like *Romola*, it initially appeared in serial form, but without preface or introduction. Then, apparently ‘for the satisfaction of those who love a true story,’ Hardy added a preface to the volume edition that appeared as part of the 1895-6 ‘Wessex’ collection of his novels.

The reader is left in no doubt that the voice of the preface is the author’s. It is signed ‘T. H.’ and dated October 1895. Initially, the tone is matter-of-fact and down-to-earth, setting the scene as well as discussing the sources. The author reports that the ‘present tale’ was ‘founded’ on oral and written testimony, much of it gathered by himself. Reflecting his commitment to what Matthew Arnold dismissively described as ‘English provincialism’ (quoted in Fleishman 1972: 183), he also notes the inspiration of the ‘casual relics’ of the Napoleonic Wars littering the area around Weymouth in which the story is set:

An outhouse door riddled with bullet-holes, which had been extemporized by a solitary man as a target for firelock practice when the landing [a French invasion] was hourly expected, a heap of bricks and clods on a beacon-hill, which had formed the chimney and walls of the hut occupied by the beacon-keeper, worm-eaten shafts and iron heads of pikes for the use of those who had no better weapons, ridges on the down thrown up during the encampment, fragments of volunteer uniform, and other such lingering remains. (Hardy 1997: 4)

Towards the preface's end, however, another, more persecuted tone sets in, at times approaching rancour. Hardy was apparently reacting to charges made in *The Critic* and in the *Academy* magazines in 1882 that a scene in the novel featuring the drilling of local militia drilling (chapter 23) had been plagiarised. In response, Hardy admits to using C. H. Gifford's 1816 *History of the Wars occasioned by the French Revolution* as a source, and was 'mistaken in supposing the account to be advanced as authentic, or to refer to rural England'. Gifford, it transpired, had copied from an account given by an American writer, which was reprinted in a travel book. In rather unconvincing mitigation, however, Hardy points out that the description he had copied 'does in a large degree accord with the local traditions of such scenes that I have heard recounted, times without number, and the system of drill was tested by reference to the Army Regulations of 1801, and other military handbooks.' (Ibid.)

Hardy's desire to set the record straight is striking. He was not by any means signed up to a positivistic view of history. 'Is not the present quasi-scientific system of writing history mere charlatanism?' a query in one of his notebooks wonders. He also classed *The Trumpet-Major* among his 'Romances and Fantasies' in the Wessex series, rather than 'Novels of Character and Environment', suggesting a lower commitment to historical realism than might be expected even of his other novels. (Fleishman 1972: 180-1, 185) So, the urge to prove that he had tried to maintain standards of historical scholarship in the research undertaken for the *The Trumpet-Major* is puzzling, and shows that anxieties concerning the role of history in historical fiction explored more satirically by Scott still rankled authors and critics alike—if anything, they had intensified. But Hardy's preface also demonstrated that efforts to find a literary way of addressing these anxieties had all but been abandoned.

It took Virginia Woolf—or not, depending how she is read—to find a more imaginative way of invoking and discussing these anxieties.

Orlando: A Biography (1928) was Virginia Woolf's only historical novel. It is also her only work to contain a substantial peritextual commentary—an odd, contentious production, taking the form of a list of acknowledgements. And what a list. It begins with her 'illustrious' literary forebears; 'Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Bronte, De Quincey, and Walter Pater', a selection,

ordered according to no obvious scheme, which places her in a sophisticated, adventurous writing tradition, each author known for challenging and sometimes breaking generic boundaries in their work, both fictional and historical. There follows a roll-call of Woolf's similarly 'illustrious' coterie of collaborators, family and friends: members of the secret Cambridge Apostles, the Bloomsbury Group and its acolytes, aristocratic patrons—a total of fifty nine individuals, including novelists (Forster), poets (Eliot), intellectuals (Keynes) and painters (Duncan Grant). (Woolf 2012: 5-6) The sheer effusiveness is extraordinary, so much so that many critics have read its 'mock-solemnity' as a parody: of the literary and artistic world's cliquishness, of the peritextual commentary as a literary device, of the novelist's desperation for historical authentication. One of those thanked, Raymond Mortimer, described it as 'a parody of prefaces' that reflected the novel's 'tearing high spirits'. (Southworth 2012: 78-9)

A parodic reading, however, does not explain why the list features so many identifiable individuals to whom her gratitude seems to be sincere. To the longtime family friend Nelly Cecil, for example, she later wrote 'hand on heart, if that is the correct position' that her motives in thanking her in the preface 'were honourable affection, gratitude, esteem'. (Ibid.) But she would not need to put her hand on her heart unless she expected Cecil to suspect another motive.

There is evidence that she wished to demonstrate the book's factual authority. The first living person to be thanked, to whom she was 'specially indebted', was 'Mr C. P. Sanger, without whose knowledge of the law of real property this book could never have been written'. A barrister specialising in property law and intestacy is an unlikely figure to be given such a privileged mention in a modernist biographical novel. How could matters of jurisprudence have had such an influence in a fiction about the life of a poet who lives from the last days of Elizabeth I to the twentieth century, switching gender along the way?

Sanger had an interest in literature, having produced a meticulous and eccentric chronology of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, plotting the story's relationship to property and inheritance law. In the latter stages of *Orlando*, one of the main dilemmas faced by the gender-switching eponymous character is the ownership of property she had owned as a man. Returning from Constantinople,

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Orlando was to learn how little the most tempestuous flutter of excitement avails against the iron countenance of the law; how harder than the stones of London Bridge it is, and than the lips of a cannon more severe. No sooner had she returned to her home in Blackfriars than she was made aware of a succession of Bow Street runners and other grave emissaries from the Law Courts that she was a party to three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence, as well as innumerable minor litigations, some arising out of, others depending on them. The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them. (Woolf 2012: 124)

Evidently, it was important to Woolf's project for her account of the 'iron countenance of the law' to be as factual as the stones of London Bridge, and she asserts as much in the preface by acknowledging a well-known authority on the subject. It also indicates a commitment to scholarly standards, an attitude reinforced by the inclusion of an index—a highly unusual and extravagant paratextual addition to a fictional work.

The only historian Woolf acknowledges in her preface was Thomas Babington Macaulay—one of the 'illustrious' predecessors. But the book's debt to him was less likely to be as a historical source than as inspiration for *Orlando's* daring literary experimentalism. Macaulay saw any form of literature that drew on history as lying on 'debatable land', under the 'jurisdiction of two hostile powers...Reason and the Imagination'—just the kind of contested cultural territory that suited Woolf's modernist iconoclasm. (Quoted in Hamnett 2011: 134)

However, Woolf also acknowledges a debt to conventional historical sources. Alluding surely with due humility rather than parodic playfulness to 'whatever accuracy' the book might 'attain', she thanks her husband for 'the patience with which he has invariably helped my researches' as well as for his 'profound historical knowledge'. She thanks Margery Snowden, a family acquaintance, for her 'indefatigable researches in the archives of Harrogate and Cheltenham' which were 'none the less arduous for being vain'. And she thanks the 'officials of the British Museum and Record Office' for their 'wonted courtesy'. Her reference to Snowden—'not a particular favourite', according to one Woolf scholar—has a hint of satire, but this only adds to the contrasting sincerity of the acknowledgement of the nation's two main archival

repositories and of her husband, a noted intellectual. In the process, she clearly signals the hard historical graft that went into the composition of the work and underwrote its historical credentials. (Southworth 2012: 94)

Since the publication of *Orlando*, the acknowledgement has become established as one of the main peritextual devices in historical novels for noting the use of authenticating research as well as personal or professional obligations. It helps address one of the main problems of peritextual commentaries, which is that they introduce 'a fundamental metafictional element to the form' which 'demonstrates that as a genre the historical novel provokes a certain anxiety and disquiet on the part of the writer.' (de Groot 2009: 9) To a certain extent, the acknowledgement overcomes this by using what might be considered a natural expression of humility and gratitude to manifest, as if by accident, evidence of the work's historical credibility. For example, in her bestselling 2010 'adventure' *The Historian*, Elizabeth Kostova makes no explicit claims about the factual basis of her story, but in a preface expresses her gratitude to the 'scholars' from the Universities of Bucharest, Michigan and Istanbul, and the much-thanked staff of the British Library, as well as the libraries of Philadelphia and the Rutherford Literary Museum. (Kostova 2010: viii-ix) In her successful debut historical novel *The Birth of Venus* (2004), set in Renaissance Florence, Sarah Dunant states: 'This book is built on a scaffold of history constructed from a number of contemporary sources, eminent scholars and art historians'. She goes on to thank some of them, and list their works in a 'short bibliography'. (Dunant 2004: 410)

As well as the acknowledgement, another peritextual device used in contemporary historical fiction is the coda, a note at the end of the novel to provide the reader with supplemental information about the outcome of the events featured in the fiction. In her Booker-Prize-Winning *Regeneration* trilogy, for example, Pat Barker adds an author's note for readers 'who may wish to know more about some of the historical characters encountered in this novel', and goes on to explain what happened to them, as though they might have stepped out of her fiction and back into the realm of fact once her story was concluded. She follows her summary of these aftermaths with a list of historical works that 'can be unreservedly recommended'. (Barker 1996: 591)

Few of these more contemporary authors, however, manifest the interest or even awareness demonstrated by their predecessors in the complexities surrounding the use of history in fiction. Reflecting, perhaps, the genre's continuing success, it is as though the issue, while not resolved, has been rendered irrelevant by convention and tradition. Some give advice as to how a discrimination should be made between fact and fiction, but in the form of a glib disclaimer that reverses the peritextual pleadings of credibility. 'The reader may ask how to tell fact from fiction,' Hilary Mantel, now doyenne of the genre, wrote in the Author's Note for *In a Place of Greater Safety*, her 1992 debut novel about the French Revolution. 'A rough guide: anything that seems particularly unlikely is probably true.' (Mantel 1993: x) Likewise, prefacing his novel *Sweet Thames* (1992), about London's sanitation crisis of the 1840s, Matthew Kneale wrote: 'The more strange, painful or ludicrous an incident may seem, the more closely based upon actual occurrences it is likely to be.' (Kneale 2001: n.p.)

When it came to writing the historical fiction that makes up the creative component of this thesis, I felt no such complacency. Coming from a background of writing biography and historical nonfiction, I fretted about how the history would shape the story, and the story the history. Would I exercise my artistic licence responsibly? What, even, did the licence permit me to do?

§

The Angel of Ferrara tells a story from three perspectives: that of Tarquinia Molza, a singer in the court of the duke of Ferrara, Filippo Fiorini, an agent or 'factor' in the household of the duke's brother and Jacomo Bonaccioli, a debt collector. All of them are trying to find the singer's son, a chorister who went missing after singing practice. The story takes place over a two-week period in the spring of 1579, while celebrations are underway for the duke's wedding, his third, which everyone is hoping will produce a male heir.

Though the choice of plot, period, setting and characters for the *Angel of Ferrara* was the result of a complex range of personal as well as professional aspirations and circumstances, the starting point was a historical paper, an article published in *Renaissance Quarterly* entitled 'Guglielmo Gonzaga and the Castrati' by Richard Sherr (1980).

The paper concerned the development of the idea of castrati in the middle of the sixteenth century in the court of Guglielmo Gonzaga, third Duke of Mantua (1538-1587). Mantua was one of a string of Italian aristocratic city states (such as Parma, Bologna and pre-eminently Florence) that had managed to remain independent of various imperial encroachments, and were in ferocious competition with one another, the main focus of Gonzaga's rivalry being Duke Alfonso II d'Este (1533-1597), who ruled the neighbouring city of Ferrara. (Romanelli)

The instruments of this competition were forms of ostentation that demonstrated the potentates' ability to raise finance, attract talent and command attention. I was intrigued by the notion of castrati as an invention—like oil painting (or, indeed, electricity or the internet), developed in response to the cultural pressures of the era.

I could have attempted a conventional historical account of this development, but felt that, on the basis of the archival traces that apparently survived, there was little more to add, and I would be prevented from animating, so to speak, the ferocious competitive pressures and the hidden social effects at work, the contrast between the transcendental beauty of aristocratic/plutocratic ostentation and the sometimes savage mechanisms that gave rise to it.

During the 1570s and 1580s, the region of Italy now known as Emilia Romagna was a cultural battleground, and singing one of the main armaments. Ferrara's Duke Alfonso had developed what was perhaps the most effective weapons yet: a group of three women singers known as the *Concerto delle Donne*. In 1582-3, the musician Giulio Caccini, part of the Florentine musical establishment, described them as 'three angels of paradise' who sing 'so miraculously that it seems to be impossible to do better'. (Newcomb 1980: 20-1, 90)

The wedding taking place in the novel is Alfonso's to Duke Guglielmo's 15-year-old daughter Margherita. Rather than introducing a period of rapprochement between the two dukes, the marriage seemed to intensify their rivalry, culminating with Guglielmo walking out on a performance of Alfonso's singing ladies, proclaiming he would 'rather be an ass than a lady'. (24) It was this jealousy, going back more than a decade, that seemed to prompt the Mantuan duke's search for a new kind of performer that would trump Alfonso's 'angels of paradise'.

Sherr's study of Guglielmo's efforts revealed that the idea of using castrated boys as singers was first mooted, at least in the Gonzaga archives, in the mid-1560s, when a letter was received from Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, Duke Alfonso's uncle, offering the Mantuan duke a French 'cantoretto'. The term is ambiguous, but as Sherr points out, other words were more conventionally used to refer to boy sopranos (*putti, fanciulli, figluoli, or cantorini*), and a later reference seems to indicate that Ippolito was referring to a castrated singer called Guglielmo Fordos.

The uncertainty over terminology shows how the implications and opportunities presented by this new instrument of courtly grandeur were still being worked out, and this was reflected in the difficulties Guglielmo continued to have in finding suitable candidates. Agents scouring France, Spain and Rome on the duke's behalf only managed to find a handful of examples, most of poor quality and prohibitively expensive. In the end, Guglielmo's desperate Spanish agent Girolamo Negri suggested that the duke 'make his own'. (Sherr 1980: 34-6) It was this notion that inspired the plot for *The Angel of Ferrara*.

The other main contribution of Sherr's paper to the novel's setting and story related more to the absence rather than presence of historical evidence. As Sherr acknowledged, very little is known about the origins of the idea of castrati, the subject of human castration being taboo in Christendom, where it was prohibited under Biblical law (Deuteronomy 21.3: 'He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.'). As Guglielmo's efforts showed, the castration of boys for the purposes of producing a distinctive voice seems first to have occurred in Europe in France and Spain, but how it reached those countries is a matter of conjecture (Sherr suggested French contact with the Ottoman empire via Marseilles, or Moorish influences in Spain, but acknowledged problems with both explanations). (Sherr 1980: 47)

As to how castrati were 'made', in Europe or elsewhere, even less is known. Quoting a German historian of music, Sherr characterised it as a 'crime buried in the night'.* (46)

At the time of Guglielmo's investigations, it still appeared to be a somewhat hit-or-miss enterprise, singers reportedly having weak or hoarse voices, some being unable to hit high notes or to sing softly, and there are indications the trauma of mutilation rendered them 'fickle', as one exasperated agent put it. (42)

The earliest known English account of methods of castrating boy singers dates to more than a century later. Robert Samber's *Eunuchism Display'd* (1718) was a translation of a French text of 1707, *Traité des Eunuques* by Charles Ancillon, spelling out what was involved:

This Operation was commonly effected, by putting the Patient in a Bath of warm Water, to soften and supple the Parts, and make them more tractable; some small time after they pressed the Jugular Veins, which made the Party so stupid and insensible, that he fell into a kind of Apoplexy, and then the action could be performed with scarce any pain at all to the Patient... Sometimes they used to give a certain quantity of Opium to the Persons designed for Castration, whom they cut while they were in their dead Sleep, and took from them those Parts which Nature took so great Care to form; but as it was observed, that most of those that had been cut after this manner died by this Narcotick.

Ancillon also reported the 'Persian' practice of using 'Hemlock and other Herbs'. (Ancillon and Samber 1718: 14-6)

An 1877 report in *The Lancet* described another form of castration performed on imperial Chinese eunuchs, involving the removal of both penis and scrotum 'by a single sweep of the operator's knife or scissors' and a small disk of wood or pewter being inserted into the wound, which was then washed with pepper and water. 'The patient is then walked for three hours without rest, and for the following three days he is allowed no drink, while the plug fills the urethra. On the fourth day the plug is removed and if the urine flows he is looked upon as cured; but, should the overstrained bladder refuse to act, he is left to die'. (Quoted in Flood 1899: 297)

* "Lichtscheu and heimlich liegen die Anfänge des Verbrechens in geheimnisvolle Nacht begraben."

It was a conjectural combination of these practices that formed the basis of the experimental procedure portrayed in *The Angel of Ferrara*. I fretted about including the Chinese procedure described in the *Lancet* article, given that there is no record of it being used in Italy or elsewhere in Europe, and that I had introduced it for reasons that were ultimately sensationalistic (it increased the stakes for the boys being experimented upon). However, invoking the principle that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, I eventually decided the contrivance was justified.

Given Sherr's scholarship, an obvious setting for the story was Mantua, but other factors favoured Ferrara. Not only was the Estense court heavily invested in musical innovation, but Duke Alfonso, Guglielmo's rival, was known to have employed a Spanish 'eunuch' called Hernando as early as 1562, who, according to the Neapolitan musician resident in the court of Parma, had been 'admired' as one of the best sopranos in Italy. (Guerzoni 2001)

Ferrara and its ruling Este family was also the subject of a historical study that helped develop one of the novel's main fictional objectives, which was to observe Renaissance aristocratic privilege and ostentation from a commoner's as well as courtier's perspective. Such a point of view is by its nature hard to trace through the historical record. However, Diane Yvonne Ghirardo's 2001 study 'The Topography of Prostitution in Renaissance Ferrara' turned out to be a particularly fruitful source.

Unusually for an academic article, the opening of Ghirardo's paper reads like a work of fiction:

On any given morning in 1471, the prostitute Giovanna of Venice, then resident of a Ferrarese brothel on Via Malborghetto, might have contemplated with resignation the options open to her for a day on the town [...]. Unless it was Saturday and she planned to go to the public market near the cathedral, legally she could not leave her *chiuso* (single room or small residence) at all [...]. She was also prohibited from frequenting any of the city's inns or hostelries on pain of immediate expulsion. (Ghirardo 2001: 402)

Drawing on an impressive range of contemporary Italian sources (including maps, official records such as the *Diario ferrarese dall'anno*, and archives of wills, inventories, contracts and surveyors' records), Ghirardo provided a vivid portrait of the 'spatial

practices' enacted in the city's public and private domains, and how they shaped the lives of those considered at the time as historically inconsequential.

Tuohy's magisterial *Herculean Ferrara* (2002) related to an earlier period, but recounted in extraordinary detail the artistic and architectural environment created by the patronage of Alfonso's great grandfather Ercole I (1471-1505), and the craftsmen responsible for it. This had shaped the city the great grandson ruled, and established the level of prestige he struggled to maintain.

Tuohy's work also brought a focus on the economics of ostentation, and how aristocrats exploited an increasingly sophisticated financial system to pay for it. 'The duke [Ercole] was never really in a position to be able to afford all the expenditure necessary to sustain the court festivals or his building projects,' Tuohy revealed. 'Much of Herculean Ferrara was built on borrowed money.' (Tuohy 2002: 122) The result was a deficit-driven economy which the duke and his successors could only sustain by becoming increasingly reliant on an influx of Spanish Jews who arrived in the city in the fifteenth century, providing a source of desperately-needed liquidity and tax revenue. But, as Tuohy showed, their presence came at the cost of considerable popular unease:

In 1481 a riot broke out against a Jew accused of crucifying a child, and the duke in person had to go and quell the mob...because the Jew was a banker who held much property in pawn, some of which was the duke's, and he feared the consequences of the Jew's house being sacked. (30)

In 1490, when the duke came under the sway of the reformist Florentine cleric Savonarola, the Ferrarese Jews were forced to wear yellow badges of identification, just as prostitutes were required to wear a yellow mantle. (Tuohy 2002: 172, Ghirardo 2001: 402)

With Sherr's, Ghirardo's and Tuohy's works helping establish the setting, other historical research played a decisive role in the development of the characters. Anthony Newcomb's 1980 two-volume monograph *The Madrigal in Ferrara* introduced the name Tarquinia Molza, a widow from Modena (part of the Este dukedom) who became a prominent member of Alfonso's *Concerto delle Donne*. Unusually for a commoner, Molza was the subject of a contemporary biography, Francesco Patrizi's

The Philosophy of Love, translated into English by J. W. Crayton in 2003, which revealed not only her exceptional talent as a musician, but her intellectual accomplishments, which included translating the works of Plato. (Patrizi 2003)

Filippo Fiorini was the other main character of the book inspired by historical sources. His name, and much of his character, was based on a servant in the household of Ippolito d'Este, as documented in Mary Hollingsworth's 2005 study *The Cardinal's Hat: Money, Ambition, and Everyday Life in the Court of a Borgia Prince*. Though the subtitle of Hollingsworth's book emphasised the connection of its subject with the better-known Borgia dynasty (the cardinal of the title was the son of the notorious Lucrezia Borgia, wife of Alfonso II's grandfather), Ippolito was a prominent member of the Este dynasty, a great artistic patron in Ferrara as well as Rome, and the man who was Guglielmo's earliest contact in his efforts to find castrati. One Jacomo Filippo Fiorini was Ippolito's *fattore* (agent or factor) in Ferrara, described by Hollingsworth as 'hard-working, conscientious and honest'. Hollingsworth's detailed study of the extensive Este archives in Modena revealed telling details about Fiorini's character and role, about his approach to the dull but vital task of keeping the cardinal's books, his troubled relationship with a fraudulent assistant called Tomaso Morelli (who, unlike his master, had been promoted to his post through nepotism) and the debt-driven economics that ruled life in a courtly household. (Hollingsworth 2005: 134-5, 150-1)

The third of the novel's main characters, the debt collector Jacomo Bonaccioli, was not based on any historical source. While the Florentine debt crisis and the decline of the Medici Bank in the late fifteenth century has been well documented (for example in de Roover 1947), searches for the role of debt in general and debt collectors in particular during the late Renaissance period yielded few results. The term used in the novel to refer to Bonaccioli's role, 'colletore', came from an entry in John Florio's seventeenth-century Italian dictionary. (Florio 1659) Other than that, most of the historical information relating to Bonaccioli and the wider issue of banking and debt came from studies about Jews in Renaissance Italy (see for example Bonfil 1994, Milano 1939, Ravid 1976) and the Fugger Bank. (Mentges 2002)

This, then, was the main research that laid groundwork for the novel, all of it secondary, but published in peer-reviewed journals or academic books.

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How, then, was it put to work? Margaret Atwood, commenting on her 1996 historical novel *Alias Grace*, based on a notorious nineteenth-century murder case, devised a simple rule: ‘when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it’, otherwise she was ‘free to invent’. (Atwood 1998: 1515) Sarah Waters seemed to adopt a similar approach in her own historical fiction, though with a telling dispensation: ‘I don’t think novels should misrepresent history, unless it’s for some obvious serious or playful purpose.’ (Quoted in de Groot 2009: 9) In his survey of historical fiction, de Groot endorsed this view—indeed, seemed to regard speculative infilling as the writer’s primary role, the author’s ‘creative wriggle room’ lying in ‘the gaps of history, in the spaces between knowledges, in the lack in texts, within the misunderstood codes, and it is the very insubstantiality of the past that allows them to introduce their version of events.’ (de Groot 2009: 182)

I struggled with Atwood’s view of a clear delineation between ‘solid facts’ and the ‘gaps’ lying between them. Professional historians, even those who hold firmly with a realist or positivist view of history, would consider such a supposition naive. In the case of sixteenth-century Italy, an early-modern culture that was still predominantly oral, names and dates can rarely be known with certainty or precision. Everything from the time of day to the value of a coin is fluid. For example, while Ferrara had an official currency (the *lire marchesana*), many others were in routine use in the city, such as the Roman *scudo di moneta* or the Venetian ducat. A variety of gold currencies, such as the Florentine florin, were used as mediums of exchange, but the rate of exchange was rarely recorded and highly variable. (See Hollingsworth 2005: xii) In a story that is about, among other things, the monetary value of people revealed through the ransoming of hostages, how should such variations be accounted for?

One particular ‘fact’ that had an impact on the plot of *The Angel of Ferrara* turned out to be far from solid. The fictional Tarquinia Molza in the novel is a widow working in Ferrara in 1579. According to one source, the historical Molza was widowed a decade earlier, in 1569. (Newcomb 1980) The Italian *Dictionary of National Biography* identifies the year of her husband’s death as 1579 (Romanelli); Patrizi, a contemporary, indicated it was 1578. (Patrizi 2003) What year should I use, and on what basis: historical accuracy or fictional convenience? Does it even matter?

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Another difficulty with sticking to the 'solid facts' is that to view a foreign sixteenth-century city through the lens of modern fiction inevitably results in distortion. In his definitive survey of historical fiction, the Hungarian philosopher and critic György Lukács suggested the form has to acknowledge this openly by embracing what Hegel called 'necessary anachronism'. Lukács noted, for example, how Scott had relied upon anachronistic devices and effects to allow his characters 'to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done'. Indeed, it was through the 'expression of thought and feeling' in a way which outstripped 'the consciousness of the age' in which his stories are set that Scott showed his 'great poetic sensitivity'. (Lukács 1962: 63)

This creates an obvious tension with the 'solid facts', in so far as they can be known. Do they remain as factual when they are 'expressed' anachronistically?

'Words, words, words,' was Hamlet's cry (II:2). That is all a literary character, fictional, biographical or historical, is made up of—yet very few of those words are likely to come from the time and place in which they appear. Some see this as a central issue. As the novelist Adam Thorpe put it:

Refusing to use the past as mere picturesque setting, the best historical fiction doesn't so much give us a glimpse into that foreign country as let us look out from it. Language is the key. In my novel *Ulverton*, set in a village over 300 years, I used strict imitations of period language to find my way into the folds of each century. (Thorpe 2014)

Language may be the key, but the 'imitations of period language', whether 'strict' or not, can never be authentic. What little of period language survives is literary rather than oral, so if characters are to speak, there is nothing to imitate. In the case of *The Angel of Ferrara*, imitation was not even an option. The inhabitants of an early-modern Italian city like Ferrara did not speak or think in Italian, let alone English, rather a variety of vernaculars and dialects determined by where they were brought up, their social status and their occupation. (See Burke 1981)

In early drafts of the novel, an attempt was made to invent a vernacular for the Bonaccioli character, Robert Greene's dictionaries of Elizabethan 'cant' providing an English analogue of a roughly similar vintage, but, in the context of a work of realist

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fiction with a third-person narrator, it seemed to emerge as the just the kind of 'antique colouring' Eliot had deplored as 'silly'. (Greene 1591)

In the end, the best advice seemed to come from Hilary Mantel, which was typically pragmatic. 'Too much period flavor, and you slow up the story,' she argued in a 2012 article for the *Wall Street Journal*, while a neutral modern idiom would come over as 'flavorless'. 'So what to do?'

Relax, I think; accept that you will never be authentic. Recently I've been writing about the early Tudor period. We simply don't know how people conversed in that era. Our sources are mostly official: government records, legal documents. The private letters that have been preserved tend to have been kept because they were important: That is, they deal with formal matters. We simply don't know how servants talked between themselves or how the mass of illiterate men and women communicated. (Mantel 2012b)

Research, then, can help establish the environment of the novel—the manners of the characters, the setting in which they move and with which they interact, the historical forces acting upon them—but there are limits. And the idea that 'solid fact' provides anchor-points for plot, or acts as a sort of static foundation or structure upon which the fiction is built, seems inadequate if not naive—at least, that is what I discovered when it came to writing *The Angel of Ferrara*.

Often, for example, I found that it was not the research that shaped the fiction, but the fiction that shaped the research, particularly when it came to points in the story when it was hard to see how a character might react to events. Addressing these moments in a way that would be psychologically convincing and narratively coherent seemed vital to character development, but working through of the internal conditions that seemed to present themselves to a particular character at a particular time within the context of the story did not always prove productive. At such times, it was often useful to turn back to research, to hunt through available historical evidence as a detective might the scene of a crime for an as yet unidentified clue that might explain what could be going on.

An example is Filippo's response, in one of the early sections of 'Day 7' of the novel, to the discovery that a kidnapper of Tarquinia's missing child Angelo might be a man called Sancto Novellino, the cardinal's gardener and slaughterer. (p.134 ff above)

Novellino's character was inspired by one employed by Filippo's historical namesake, Cardinal Ippolito's agent. As Hollingsworth reported, the historical Fiorini bought fifteen pigs in the market in Ferrara in the winter of 1537 which one of the household gardeners, a man named Piero, slaughtered at a price of 2 soldi 6 denari a pig. (Hollingsworth 2005: 172) This Piero became Sancto Novellino, employed by the fictional Fiorini as the cardinal's gardener-slaughterer, whose ear had been lopped for some unspecified offence.

Jacomo's report to Filippo and Tarquinia of his encounter with Angelo's kidnappers prompts the following interchange:

'Did you recognise them, these kidnappers?' [Tarquinia] asks [...]

Bonaccioli shakes his head. 'The older one had a missing ear, scarring around the side of his head.' He indicates by cupping a hand over one ear.

'Scarring? Like...a convicted coiner?' Filippo realises too late the incriminating note of alarm in his voice.

'Yes.' The colletore is alert to the sudden show of interest. 'You know him?'

Filippo pauses, wondering what to say. 'Tall?' he ventures.

Bonaccioli shakes his head. 'No, squat, like you.'

Sancto Novellino, the cardinal's gardener and slaughterer, perfectly described. (pp.120-121 above)

Having made this possible identification, the issue then arose of how Filippo would respond. If the kidnapper was indeed Novellino, that would suggest the cardinal's household was somehow involved in the kidnapping plot—for Filippo, an inconceivable conclusion, yet one Jacomo's evidence would not allow him to discount.

In early drafts, the next scene featuring Filippo concerned his attempt to interview Novellino to find out the truth. But it seemed that the cardinal's inquisitive but timid servant would not so quickly and boldly confront such a bewildering possibility (and dangerous man) without a certain amount of agonising. One way of showing this was by having him fret overnight about whether or not it could be the cardinal's employee the colletore Jacomo had described. So, where might Filippo look to find an answer? He was not the sort of person who would seek emotional support from a confidant or

friend, or talk it through with a senior member of staff. Nor would he be happy drawing on instinct or even experience to settle the matter. He would want to deploy a more systematic, actuarial approach, the basis of most of his determinations.

So, what form would such an approach take for a rather pedantic sixteenth-century Italian accountant? How would he go about reckoning the chances that the kidnapper with the lopped ear was Novellino?

Research into the history of the mathematics of probability showed that as late as 1579, the year in which *The Angel of Ferrara* is set, they were not well known. The dice game hazard and other forms of gambling were popular in Italy during the Renaissance period (mentioned by, among others, Dante in the sixth canto of his *Purgatorio*), and habitual players must have been capable of guessing odds. But the mathematics had yet to be formalised.

In *The Angel of Ferrara*, however, Filippo has been established as something of a financial and mathematical innovator, having adopted in his working practices the relatively novel methods of Fra Luca Bartolomeo de Paccioli, who in his *Summa Arithmetica, Geometria, Proportioni et Propotritionalità*, published in 1494, set out the principles of what came to be known as double-entry bookkeeping. Paccioli provides in this work one of the earliest published descriptions for a method of calculating odds, in his case as would arise from playing a ballgame. However, in the novel, Filippo had also managed to get hold of a manuscript copy of Cardano's *Liber de Ludo Aleae* ('The Book of Games of Chance'), a rare text probably written in the 1560s but not published until 1663. (Kendall 1956)

In order to work out the odds, however, Filippo needed more than an algorithm; he needed some data, and further research disclosed a possible source—an official document of a sort known to exist in Florence at around this time, known as the 'The Book of the Condemned'.

The existence of books of this sort came to light in a 1998 paper by William J. Connell and Giles Constable entitled 'Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence'. (Constable and Connell 1998) It tells the story of one Antonio Rinaldeschi who, on 11 July, 1501, left the Fig Tree tavern in Florence having lost money and an article of

clothing (his shirt, presumably) at the gaming table. Cursing the Virgin Mary for his misfortune, a bloodshot eye caught sight of a fresco of the Virgin Annunciate, known as the Madonna or S. Maria de' Ricci and, in a fit of fury, Rinaldeschi scooped up a handful of horse-dung, which he threw at the face of the Virgin. Perhaps in a panic at having been seen performing the act by a small boy, he fled to a villa outside the city.

What might seem a trifling example of blasphemy to modern eyes was taken very seriously by the Florentine authorities. A man-hunt tracked him down to a nearby convent, where he was arrested and taken back to the Bargello, the fortified palace of Florence's *podestà* or sheriff. There he confessed to a board of magistrates known as the 'Eight of Security' (*Otto di guardia*). Begging to be executed as he feared being lynched by a mob if he was released, he was condemned to being hanged from a window of the Borgello prison, an apparently common method of execution at the time to avoid the body being interfered with.

In sixteenth-century Florence, there was a body known as the Company of the Blacks (*Compagnia dei Neri*), a religious confraternity that would accompany the condemned after their final absolution from their cell to the place of execution. They kept a log of their activities known as the 'Book of the Condemned' (*Libro delle condanne*), which included details about the crime, and it was this source that provided the detail of Rinaldeschi's case.

It seemed reasonable to locate a company similar to the *Compagnia dei Neri* in Ferrara, as both the institution and its records were performing religious as well as bureaucratic functions that were common to both Florentine and Ferrarese cultures. This conjectural invention seemed risky, as it could be contradicted by a study of the archival sources. However, the purpose of using it was not to make a historical point about Renaissance justice in Ferrara, but to develop the fictional Fiorini's character in a way that was consistent to his individuality as well as his milieu. The scholarly information provided by Connell's and Constable's paper showed that Filippo could have had access to information that, combined with what was known about probability, would provide the sort of data-driven assessment Filippo would crave.

There are other instances of research being used in this way (for example, Tarquinia Molza's refusal to use makeup or to soap her hair). In these cases at least, the research

was used in a way at odds with the usual peritextual justifications for drawing on historical research: it was not there to provide fixed points between which the fiction acts as filling, to authenticate the story or ensure historical consistency. It was there to provide a way of exposing dimensions of the fictional (rather than historical) character that might otherwise remain hidden.

§

In her review of Mantel's *Wolf Hall* for the *New Yorker* magazine, Joan Acocella observed that the work 'is a novel, not a history book. We have no reason, without external evidence, to believe that any of it is true—though Mantel makes us want to believe.' ('Tudor Tales', *New Yorker*, 19 October, 2009) However, whatever the truth of the book's depiction of historical people and events, there is little question that Mantel undertook extensive and systematic research. So how did that research shape the result? Mantel's sparse peritexts give few clues, though hints have emerged in an epitextual corpus that has grown along with the exceptional popular and critical success of her work.

The foundation of her entire characterisation of Thomas Cromwell, the indomitable central character of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, is his brutal and humble upbringing. The book's opening image is of the boy Cromwell sprawled across the ground having been felled by his abusive father, a Putney butcher and brewer. (Mantel 2009: 3) Time and again, Thomas is reminded of his humble origins, particularly by the Boleyns, who have their own social insecurities to deal with. 'Butcher's dog,' Sir Thomas Boleyn is reduced to whispering in contempt, after being humiliated in front of Cromwell by Cardinal Wolsey. (70) Mary, Anne's sister, says her brother George described him as being 'born in the gutter'. (111)

The evidence supports this foundation. As for many in this era from humble origins, the date of Thomas Cromwell's birth is unknown—a lacuna which Mantel cunningly uses in an early scene where the young Cromwell returns to Wolsey after a trip to Yorkshire, the cardinal being amused when it emerges his emissary does not know his own age. (24) However, it is known from one contemporary that he was a 'ruffian [...]' in his young days' and court records reveal that his father was fined on nearly fifty

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occasions for sharp business practices, convicted of assault and evicted from his tenancy for tampering with official documents. (Leithead 2004)

Impressive levels of historical authority and erudition are demonstrated throughout Mantel's Tudor novels. For example, in the run-up to Anne Boleyn's coronation, Cromwell inspects the rooms being prepared for her at the Tower of London:

[Cromwell] orders in braziers to help dry out the plaster. He wants to get on with the frescoes—he wishes Hans would come down, but he is painting de Dinteville and says he needs to push on with it, as the ambassador is petitioning Francis [I, King of France] for his recall, a whining letter on every boat. (448)

Tudor historians and aficionados will know the 'Hans' to be Hans Holbein, and the painting that detains him from Cromwell's service to be 'The Ambassadors', the portrait of Jean de Dinteville, French ambassador to England in 1533, and Georges de Selve, bishop of Lavaur, with the distorted image of a skull in the foreground. It is a tiny detail, but its presence demonstrates to those who wish for reassurance that she has done her work.

Exploiting Byron's dictum about the truth being stranger than fiction, she also has a habit of inserting historical details that are so incongruous, so confounding of modern expectations and assumptions about the past, that it is hard not to read them as authentic. An example from *Bring up the Bodies*, her sequel to *Wolf Hall*, concerns fashion:

This season young men carry their effects in soft pale leather bags, in imitation of the agents for the Fugger bank, who travel all over Europe and set the fashion. The bags are heart-shaped and so to him it always looks as if they are going wooing, but they swear they are not. Nephew Richard Cromwell sits down and gives the bags a sardonic glance. (Mantel 2012a: 52)

'Do you know,' asked a startled James Wood in his *New Yorker* review of the novel, 'if Mantel has manufactured or borrowed from the record this information about the fashionable Fugger bag?' (James Wood 2012)

It seems she had borrowed. The Fugger Bank (which features in *The Angel of Ferrara*) was a powerful German finance house of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries based in Augsburg. One of its employees was Matthäus Schwarz (1496-1564), who was not only a prominent and successful bookkeeper, but unusually flamboyant and extravagant in

'matters of attire'. He was so keen to show off his wardrobe that he commissioned an illustrated autobiography depicting himself at stages of his life wearing a variety of costumes. It is one of the illustrations in this eccentric production that shows him aged '27 years 19 weeks 1 day old' sporting a heart-shaped purse hanging from his belt, which Mantel perhaps came across while researching contemporary costume. (Mentges 2002: figure 3)

She is also alive to issues of historical speculation or controversy and ingeniously weaves them into the narrative. For example, Cromwell, planning to approach the father of Anne Boleyn about Henry's interest in her, wonders how Sir Thomas will react given the 'old rumour' that the king had cuckolded him. (Mantel 2009: 70) Just such a rumour is reported in the record, but whether or not it was true remains unknown, and Mantel leaves it to her readers to decide for themselves.

Besides these eclectic and speculative flourishes, however, Mantel's research appears to draw on mostly conventional and familiar secondary sources: Roger Bigelow Merriman's *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902), George Cavendish's *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinall, his Lyffe and Deathe* (the only work she mentions in a brief Author's Note), perhaps a more modern biography such as G. R. Elton's *Reform and Renewal* (1973), along with familiar stalwarts of Tudor and Stuart research, such as John Stowe's *Survey of London*.

Her method, then, for producing what is generally agreed to be a startlingly vivid work does not come from discovering primary sources that challenge the existing historical record. Instead, it comes from putting already familiar sources to a particularly productive fictive use, which is to serve the development of Cromwell as a compelling fictional character.

For example, Merriman tells the story of Cromwell sending his son Gregory, along with his cousin called Christopher Wellyfed, to Cambridge where a John Chekyng was to act as their tutor. A dispute arose with the tutor concerning his bills, prompting Cromwell to 'taunt', as Merriman put it, Chekyng on his educational failings. The 'honest' Chekyng protested to Cromwell that he had brought up six MAs and fellows of the university, and demanded reparations for the damage Christopher had done when he 'dyd hyng a candel in a playt to loyk apone hys boyk and so fell ascleype and the

candell fell into the bed strawe,' burning the bed, bolster and linen. (Merriman 1902: 54)

Where Merriman saw taunts on the one hand, and honesty on the other, Mantel demonstrates her almost protective engagement with her character by retelling the story from Cromwell's perspective:

Autumn comes. Gregory goes back to his tutor; his reluctance is clear enough, though little about Gregory is clear to him. 'What is it,' he asks him, 'what's wrong?' The boy won't say [...]. He regrets the choice of tutor he's made for his son and nephews, but he won't take them away at this point. The man is quarrelsome, and to be sure there was a sad episode when one of the boys set fire to his room, because he'd been reading in bed with a candle. 'It wouldn't be Gregory, would it?' he'd said, always hopeful; the master seemed to think he was treating it as a joke. And he's always sending him bills that he believes he's paid; I need a household accountant, he thinks. (Mantel 2009: 132)

There are details in this episode that seem to be at odds with what is suggested by the historical record, in particular the query 'It wouldn't be Gregory, would it?', since the information was received in a letter which included the careless scholar's identity. But the aside is needed to fulfil one of the episode's purposes, which is to throw more light on Cromwell's feelings—veering between disappointment, exasperation and touching affection—for his dimwitted son (his only surviving child, his two daughters disappearing from the historical record while they were in childhood, and in the novel dying of the plague).

A similar kind of purpose is at work when she writes of Cromwell's promotion to Master of the Rolls in 1534. He takes up residence in the master's official residence in Chancery Lane, described thus by Stow:

And then nexte was sometime the house of the conuerted lewes, founded by king Henry the third, in place of a lewes house to him forfeited, in the yeare 1233. and the 17. of his raigne, who builded there for them a faire Church now vsed, and called the Chappell for the custodie of Rolles and Records of Chancerie. It standeth not farre from the old Temple, but in the midway betweene the olde Temple and the new. (Stow 1603: 395-6)

In Mantel's hands, this stark description becomes a way of opening up a new stage in Cromwell's career, as well as adding vivacity to the character of Christophe, a fugitive from French justice he adopts as a servant:

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The Master's house in Chancery Lane is the most curious house he has ever entered. It smells of must, mould and tallow, and behind its crooked facade it meanders back, a warren of little spaces with low doorways; were our forebears all dwarves, or were they not perfectly certain how to prop up a ceiling?

This house was founded three hundred years ago, by the Henry that was then; he built it as a refuge for Jews who wished to convert. If they took this step—advisable if they wished to be preserved from violence—they would forfeit all their possession to the Crown. This being so, it was just that the Crown should house and feed them for their natural lives.

Christophe runs ahead of him, into the depths of the house. 'Look!' He trails a finger through a vast spider's web.

'You've broken up her home, you heartless boy.' He examines Ariane's crumbling prey: a leg, a wing. 'Let's be gone, before she comes back.' (Mantel 2009: 581)

There must have been few houses in Tudor London that did not smell of must, mould and tallow, that had facades that were perpendicular or interiors that were orderly. Nevertheless, in Mantel's hands, the description amounts to more than 'antique colouring', as it manifestly serves a role in the development of character and story. There is a sense of the oppressive weight of the past in the decrepit state of the house, and a suggestion of an opportunity for renewal. The observation about Henry using the house as a 'refuge' for Jews, and the justness of housing and feeding them, casts a little more light on Cromwell's principled as well as pragmatic view of justice. And in the apparently light-hearted vignette with the spider's web, an image is provided of Cromwell's deepening and dangerous involvement in the 'Great Matter' of the king's divorce, which threatened to break up not only of the royal household but the kingdom.

Mantel's ability to turn history into fiction seems to be so fluent, so seamless, she arouses concern, even suspicion in some critics, as though being capable of such a subtle transition between the two suggests a dangerous ability to manipulate. James Wood described *Wolf Hall* as 'mysteriously successful' for a work in such a 'gimcrack genre' as historical fiction. Mantel proceeds 'as if authenticity were magic rather than a science'. 'She knows that what gives fiction its vitality is not the accurate detail but

the animate one. In effect, she proceeds as if the past five hundred years were a relatively trivial interval in the annals of human emotion.’ (James Wood 2012)

Stephen Greenblatt, who, as a historicist critic of Renaissance literature, knows the era she is writing about, came to a strikingly similar conclusion, describing her success as ‘an act of conjuring’. Nevertheless, he appears not to have fallen for the trick. ‘Cromwell’s actual life story is, in its way, a sombrely fascinating one,’ he notes. ‘But it is not the story that Hilary Mantel has chosen to relate.’ (Greenblatt 2009)

Such unease reflects the consequences of Mantel’s success. For there is something historical as well as literary at stake here: Cromwell’s reputation, which in Mantel’s hands has started to undergo a profound revision.

Mantel made her name rehabilitating despised historical figures. She did so in her first novel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, which offered a sympathetic portrait of Robespierre. Cromwell has conventionally been similarly reviled. His contemporary Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500-1558) set the tone by describing him as having ‘an aptitude for ruin and destruction,’ a description by no means at odds with Holbein’s shrewd portrait. (Martin Haile 1911) Though his reputation would rise and fall over succeeding centuries, the consensus would usually settle towards the negative, particularly in the nineteenth century, when he was seen as acting not out of theological conviction but political opportunism when it came to Henry’s ‘Great Matter’. ‘Perhaps of all the mean and dastardly wretches that ever died, this was the most mean and dastardly,’ William Cobbett concluded. (Quoted in Leithead 2004)

Merriman’s influential 1902 biography helped cement his reputation as an unscrupulous schemer:

He obviously had remarkable power of quickly adapting himself to his surroundings. He rarely failed to realize immediately his relation to those with whom he came in contact, and his manner, behaviour, and expression varied accordingly. No one knew better how or when to flatter than Thomas Cromwell; on the other hand no one could be more harsh and cruel than he, when he was in a position to dictate. (Merriman 1902: 85)

It was a view that carried into another highly successful and influential work of Tudor historical fiction, Robert Bolt’s 1960 play and 1966 Oscar-winning film *A Man for All Seasons*, about Cromwell’s enemy Sir Thomas More. The script’s dramatis personae

describes Cromwell as displaying 'a self-conceit that can cradle gross crimes in the name of effective action', whereas More's face 'is intellectual and quickly delighted, the norm to which it returns serious and compassionate'. (Bolt 2013)

In order to produce her more sympathetic portrait of Cromwell as a family man and a principled as well as pragmatic politician, Mantel had to make adjustments. In the case of More, this meant the figure of intellectual integrity and religious piety depicted in Bolt's play being transformed into a cruel and sanctimonious zealot:

The word is that the Lord Chancellor has become a master in the twin arts of stretching and compressing the servants of God. When heretics are taken, he stands by at the Tower while the torture is applied. It is reported that in his gatehouse at Chelsea he keeps suspects in the stocks, while he preaches at them and harries them: the name of your printer, the name of the master of the ship that brought these books into England. They say he uses the whip, the manacles and the torment-frame they call Skeffington's Daughter. It is a portable device, into which a man is folded, knees to chest, with a hoop of iron across his back; by means of a screw, the hoop is tightened until his ribs crack. It takes art to make sure the man does not suffocate: for if he does, everything he knows is lost. (Mantel 2009: 298)

The reference to 'Skeffington's Daughter', an instrument that survived in the Tower's collection of torture instruments, is a lurid presence in Foxe's martyrology, (Nichols 1859: 189) and, as always with Mantel, its presence here is not as a museum piece but to reveal character. Arguably, it might show a certain professional interest on Cromwell's part in the technology of torture, and even a certain respect for More's artistry in its deployment. The main aim, however, is obvious, which is to demonstrate More's barbarity, and the fanatical ends it serves:

More says it does not matter if you lie to heretics, or trick them into a confession. They have no right to silence, even if they know speech will incriminate them; if they will not speak, then break their fingers, burn them with irons, hang them up by their wrists. It is legitimate, and indeed More goes further; it is blessed. (Mantel 2009: 361)

And the denigration of More is unrelenting. Every time he is mentioned, some character defect is emphasized, particularly in relation to marriage, which is contrasted with the widower Cromwell's uxoriousness: 'When More's first wife died, her successor was in the house before the corpse was cold'; (122) '...as for wives, they are two-a-penny with Thomas More.' (280)

This, it may be argued, reflects Cromwell's view of More, which was known to be antagonistic. The use of phrases such as 'The word is that...' or 'they say' before some contentious remark about More's behaviour reinforces this interpretation, as does the book's distinctive narrative voice—third person but tightly focalised around the subject of Cromwell. Nevertheless, from the words the third-person narration puts in More's mouth and the behaviour observed in particular towards his family, there can be little doubt that Mantel's More is far from the compassionate intellectual depicted by Bolt.

But the (perhaps justifiable and certainly refreshing) disparagement of More is not enough. Other characters must change too, even King Henry. Mantel's monarch is not a fickle tyrant, nor a proud prince so much as a loving, lively but reckless child with appetites over which regal omnipotence and courtly obsequiousness give him no opportunity for control: 'He likes giving; like a child, he enjoys anticipating how pleased you will be.' (443) It helps make Cromwell's solicitous care of the king seem sincere, rather than self-interested, almost heroic, rather than fawning.

As a result of these adjustments, some critics, particularly those with a background in history, have found Mantel's fictional characters at odds with what is known about their historical counterparts. In her recent study of popular fictional portrayals of Anne Boleyn, for example, Susan Bordo was disappointed that Mantel's Boleyn 'follows the old stereotype of Anne as a scheming predator'. (Bordo 2013: 235) Bordo points out how, through Cromwell, Boleyn is seen as a 'calculating being with a cold slick brain'. (Mantel 2009: 350) Boleyn's eyes are shiny 'like the beads of an abacus...always in motion'; her teeth are 'white and sharp'. (387) While accepting that Mantel's characterisation is subtle and sophisticated, Bordo points out that 'her choices of what to include and what to eliminate from the historical record suggest that she (and not merely Cromwell) is intent on building a case against Anne.' (Bordo 2013: 237)

Bemused by the discovery of 'the old, one-sided, extremist view of Anne' in a work that offers 'such as textured, unsettlingly "real" re-creation of Henry's court', Bordo speculates that this has something to do with Mantel reproducing 'our "default" Anne, who insinuates herself in the imagination whenever we aren't specifically focused on rehabilitating her.' (Ibid.)

Another interpretation of Mantel's motives is that it suited her wider fictional scheme, and its unwavering focus on Cromwell. Having chosen to portray him as a faithful, family-loving servant of power, an abused and vulnerable child who fought his way to prominence using guile when he did not need to resort to fists, it makes sense in her fictional representation of the Henrician court that those who challenge him in some way will be deserving of their fate.

Some might argue this results in a Cromwell as credible as any historical one. A figure who has beguiled biographers and historians for half a millennium, whose motives and actions have conventionally been explained as the product of a moral or psychological pathology, has come vividly and convincingly to life. Perhaps this shows that, sometimes, narrative logic and emotional acuity can yield an understanding of a person and a period that the arts of historical research and interpretation cannot.

Alternatively, Mantel's method could be seen as evidence of how, once it has passed through a fictionalising process, history becomes entirely another thing: the objective record becomes a subjective (Mantel's or her fictional Cromwell's) perception; historical truth yields to narrative logic, cause and effect to motive and agency.

§

Did I see it coming, the storm of righteous indignation which, more than twenty years ago, broke over my little black book? No, I didn't—at least not that a modest, playful piece of self-evident fiction would be regarded by the sentinels of the academy as a betrayal of History; an outrage against the profession and its code of conduct; a manifesto of ultra-relativism; the Enemy against whom a Stand Had to be Taken. (Schama 2013 Preface)

Schama's 'little black book' was *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Expectations)*, his historical fiction first published in 1991, an idiosyncratic novel which tells two stories: one about the death of General Wolfe at the battle of Quebec in 1759, the other the 1849 murder in Boston of George Parkman. The offending 'sentinels of the academy' were in truth not that numerous, the book receiving generally positive reviews. However, a few took exception to an important and respected historian entering the field of fiction. There were concerns that his imprimatur would continue a trend of confounding fact and fiction that threatened the very notion of history as an objective study of the past.

Leading the assault was Gordon Wood, a Pulitzer Prize-winner and professor of history at Brown University. 'It was bound to happen,' he lamented in his review of Schama's book for the *New York Review of Books*. 'Sooner or later a distinguished historian had to cross over, had to mingle the writing of fiction with the writing of history.' (Gordon S Wood 1991)

Wood acknowledges that *Dead Certainties* is a 'tour de force of storytelling', and accepts that Schama identifies it as a work of fiction. 'Though these stories may at times appear to observe the discursive conventions of history,' Schama states in an Author's Note to *Dead Certainties*, 'they are in fact historical novellas.' However, Wood detected that there was more to it than that. Schama followed his disclaimer about the work being purely fictional with an outburst of hedging. While he did not 'scorn the boundary between fact and fiction,' he noted that 'the most scholarly report from the archives' necessarily involves 'selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments'. He did not hold 'a naïvely relativist position that insists that the lived past is *nothing* more than an artificially designed text' yet accepted 'historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator'. (Schama 1991: 322) It was perhaps the adverb 'fatally' that was fatal as far as Wood was concerned. 'Schama cannot have it both ways,' he complained. 'He cannot write fiction and still assume that it will have the authenticity and credibility of history.' Furthermore, 'the loss of credibility' resulting from the mixing of fact and fiction 'far outweighs any aesthetic gains that Schama might have gotten from his narrative experiment. Indeed, his violation of the conventions of history writing actually puts the integrity of the discipline of history at risk.' (Gordon S Wood 1991)

The late A. J. Sherman, an Oxford historian as well as a pseudonymous author of thrillers, was equally anxious, even contemptuous, of Schama's experiment. Writing almost in despair of the 'reigning orthodoxy among many university faculties' of postmodernism, he accused Schama of helping 'erode the idea of objective truth' and of contributing, 'however unwittingly, to our vast contemporary confusion [...] about where the verifiable ends and show business begins'. *Dead Certainties* took a 'blithe approach to historical writing,' he argued, 'which teeters on the brink of infotainment,

lies in that border area perhaps more appropriate to Norman Mailer or Truman Capote, and seems fraught with problems for serious historians'. (Sherman 2005)

In a preface to a 2013 edition of the novel, Schama took on his critics in his characteristically forthright way, detecting a political motive in the attacks—in particular a backlash among right-wing historians who had mistaken him for a 'reincarnation of Edmund Burke' after reading his 1989 historical work on the French Revolution *Citizens*. Accusing him, as he saw it, of selling out 'History' for 'some sort of specious and obscure game', his response was, 'Keep your hair on, it's fiction, two novellas about history, not history itself.'

I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that anyone could be so obtuse as to imagine a book which began in the voice of a common soldier, "Twas the darkness that did the trick,' could be anything else. And anyone reading the afterword, which plainly declared the credentials of the book as fiction, couldn't possibly be left in any doubt.

Attention had been drawn, he noted, to his use of historical sources, but while 'the inclusion of documents gives the stories a matrix of reality, it does not, of course, make the stories any less fictitious'.

And yet, he was once again unable to resist creeping back into 'epistemological debates'. He cited approvingly the philosopher R. G. Collingwood's formulation that historical enquiry involved an element of 'imaginative re-enactment', though added that *Dead Certainties* 'was never intended to be any sort of formal "intervention" in that debate'. Nevertheless, an interest in General James Wolfe's death at the Battle of Quebec as 'perhaps the great heroic *exemplum virtutis* of the British Empire', initially developed as part of an undergraduate course, brought him to Benjamin West's famous painting, *The Death of General Wolfe* and a rediscovery of the historical romanticism of Francis Parkman's nineteenth-century account of the episode in his *Montcalm and Wolfe*. 'If ever there was a case of Collingwood's "imaginative re-enactment", this was it.' (Schama 2013 Preface)

'I do in fact believe in the ways contingency can circumscribe simply positivist versions of reconstructing past events,' Schama eventually conceded, but did not see his 'little pair of fictions' as demarcating that circumscription. Nevertheless, his experience showed that, from the perspective of some historians at least, historical fiction is

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something that it is dangerous to confuse with history—entangling the one, it seems, will do lasting damage to the other.

Fictional History

Stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. (Hayden White 2010: xxv)

Savage Kingdom, my history of England's efforts in the early 1600s to colonise the area around the Chesapeake Bay, was subject to some peritextual controversy before its publication in America. The New York publishers were uneasy about the title. Though it was meant ironically (the 'kingdom' being England, where political infighting led to a huge number of casualties among the early colonists, and policies on the treatment of the native Americans varied from exploitative to murderous), it was felt to be sensationalist and prone to misinterpretation. There were also concerns over the subtitle. For UK edition, it was 'Virginia & the founding of English America'. The American publishers preferred a more verbose but explicit alternative: 'The True Story of Jamestown, 1607, and the Settlement of America'. (Woolley 2008) My concern with the American version was the word 'true', which seemed presumptuous. The publishers' reasoning was that the book's title, cover art and a perusal of the opening pages might confuse readers into thinking it was a historical novel, and the word 'true' signalled otherwise.

So how 'true' was it? It was certainly not supposed to be false, nor fiction. But there were areas, in particular relating to the Indians, where notions of truth were problematic, and, to deal with them, it struck me that methods not usually associated with the conventions of strict history were required.*

The history and ethnography of the Virginia Indians is almost totally dependent on the colonisers. The Indians had no written culture, and, living in a realm almost devoid of stone and rock, a littoral in which nearly all construction was of wood, leather or plant-based fibres, the only fragments of their material culture that has survived are bones, beads, shells and outlines in the soil. Their language is extinct, except for the scraps

* The term 'Indian' was adopted in *Savage Kingdom* to denote the native population, as, at the time of writing the book, that was the term used by ethnographers and locally by those claiming native descent.

recorded by the colonists. As Thomas Jefferson pointed out in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in little more than a century, most of the tribes had been diminished to a few remnants, many, he observed, with 'more negro than Indian blood in them', anticipating the later practice in Virginia of treating the two ethnic groups as one. (Jefferson 1787: 154ff)

The conventional, positivistic approach to writing a history of such a poorly-documented population would be to undertake a careful inspection of the sources that survive (in the case of the Indians, the works of three colonists: Henry Spelman, William Strachey and Captain John Smith), using interpretative skills such as close reading and cross-referencing to correct for the distorting effects of the texts' political and rhetorical functions.

Helen Rountree, one of the most prominent historians of the Virginia Indians, adopted this approach. She wrote, for example, about one of the most perplexing aspects of Indian behaviour for the English colonists, concerning the use of place and personal names. Even the name of the region the English were colonising was unclear to them. They took it to be 'Powhatan', the name of the paramount leader, who in turn seemed to be named after the town of his birth (though perhaps the town was named after him). Strachey, however, called it Tsenacomoco, which has some philological backing (it could be derived from the Algonquian term for 'densely inhabited land'), but, curiously, neither Smith nor Spelman, who had closer and longer contact with the Indians, mentioned the term. (See discussion in Woolley 2008: 415, note 5)

When it came to personal names, the position was, for the English, even more perplexing. Rountree, writing about Virginian Indian conceptions of 'manliness', asserted that 'Powhatan personal names had meanings that everyone could understand'. Male babies were publicly named at a feast held within a few days of birth, and received more names as they grew up. 'A great exploit in war brought a man a new name, bestowed by his *weroance* [commander],' she wrote. This account of the rituals and role of naming relied almost entirely on Strachey. Smith makes only one reference to naming conventions in his copious writings, where he notes only that 'men, women, and children have their severall names according to the severall humor of their Parents'. (Smith 1624: 31) Spelman supplies the details on naming rituals to

which Rountree refers, though he does not specify it as relating just to boys. Is this, therefore, enough to be able to say anything positive and definitive on the use of names?

A similar issue arises when it comes to understanding the Indians' religion. Strachey, for example, apparently quotes Spelman when referring to a 'Great Hare' called Ahone as a supreme Indian god. Smith makes no mention of this deity, nor does Spelman in the published version of his history. The only other possible reference to this god is in the testimony of an Indian chief, though that account is garbled. (See E W Haile 1998: 880ff)

In writing *Savage Kingdom*, I felt a way was needed to deal with writing about the Indians that did not rely on this positivistic approach, because it seemed to me to lead either to assertions that could not be sustained, or sterile and ultimately futile debates about what was known.

In his *Defence of Poesy*, Philip Sidney wrote that 'neither philosopher nor historiographer could, at the first, have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great disport of poetry'. (Sidney 1595: B3r) Poetry (by which he meant 'a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture' (Cv)) preceded philosophy and history, and the evidence for this could be seen in the practices of 'nations [...] where learning flourisheth not'. He gave an instance:

Even among the most barbarous and simple Indians, where no writing is, yet have they their Poets, who make and sing songs, which they call 'Areytos', both of their ancestor's deeds and praises of their gods. (B3r)

This quote (minus the reference to 'Areytos', a term Sidney apparently got from Peter Martyr's accounts of Indian culture garnered from Spanish colonists (Cawley 1924)) became the epigram for a chapter in *Savage Kingdom* entitled 'Tsenacomoco'. My aim was to explore a history of the Indians with an 'areytos' created out of the fragmented accounts of Indian religion, geography and cosmology contained in the colonial sources, designed to give a 'hint', as I put it, 'of what the Tsenacomoco world was like, at least as seen from the perspective of an English Otasantassuwak or "wearer of leg-coverings" about to step in and destroy it.' (Woolley 2008: 50)

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The episode for which the Jamestown venture is probably best known presented similar issues when it came to sources and suggested a similarly unorthodox solution.

Captain John Smith, one of the colonial leaders, was captured by the Indians while exploring one of the many rivers feeding into the Chesapeake Bay, and, so the story went, was saved from having his brains bashed out at the command of the supreme leader Powhatan by the intervention of his daughter Pocahontas, who laid her head upon Smith's.

Smith presents a problem for any history of the Jamestown colony. He dominates the historical record as he does the venture. Much of the documentation relating to his time in Virginia is lost, notably the records of the Virginia Company in London, which financed and managed the colonial enterprise. Having been one of the colony's first movers and governors, he was badly injured in 1609 by a gunpowder accident while on an expedition up the James River, forcing his return to England. The hyperactive 'captain' (an honorific that he insisted upon throughout his publishing career) poured his frustrated energies into producing a series of books, culminating with his *Generall Historie of Virginia*, first published in 1624. (Smith 1624) It was this work that told the vivid and captivating story of his encounter with Pocahontas.

A few other texts relate his capture by the Indians, but do not mention the Pocahontas incident. One is known as the 'True Relation'. It was based on a letter Smith sent back from Jamestown, an edited version of which the Virginia Company, for its own commercial purposes, published in 1608 under the title *A true relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia*, wrongly attributed to one Thomas Watson. (Smith 1608) Other tellings of the capture appeared in another of Smith's works known as the 'Proceedings', appended to his 1612 *Map of Virginia* and in Samuel Purchas's monumental 1613 survey of English colonial ambitions, *Purchas his Pilgrimages*. (Smith 1612, Purchas 1613)

The problem for the historian is that Smith is the only source of all these accounts— independent corroboration that he was even captured by the Indians relies on Edward Maria Wingfield, the first president of the colonial council in Jamestown, who was deposed and confined to his quarters at the time. And Smith is by no means a reliable narrator. In his autobiography, for example, he wrote of himself as having come from

‘poor beginnings’, which aroused the scorn of his enemies and explained many of the slights and turmoils he suffered in later life. However, while modest, his ‘beginnings’ were not that ‘poor’, his father being a successful smallholder who enjoyed some degree of aristocratic patronage. He also claimed his parents died when he was thirteen leaving him ‘a competent means, which he [i.e. Smith] not being capable to manage, little regarded’. But archival evidence suggests his parents were alive when he was thirteen, his father dying when he was sixteen, his mother going on to remarry and dying some time later. (Smith 1986; Barbour 1964) These inconsistencies demonstrate a need to approach Smith’s writing with caution.

More troubling is that the Pocahontas story echoes an earlier adventure that Smith relates of being captured by Tartars and sold into slavery in Istanbul, where a young, high-ranking girl ‘took (as it seemed) much compassion on him’, and engineered his escape. (Barbour 1964: 58-9)

Attempts have been made to assess whether or not Pocahontas saved Smith by drawing on ethnographic evidence. Helen Rountree, for example, examined various accounts of rituals performed by ‘Woodland Indians’ to reach what she claimed to be the ‘logical conclusion’ that the story was a fabrication—but drawing such a specific conclusion from the ethnography of other Indian communities who lived along North America’s Eastern seaboard around that time hardly counts as ‘logical’. (Rountree 2006: 79-82)

An alternative approach was to see Smith’s story for what it was, a story, and present it as such. The colonial era helped establish a new form of narrative writing in Europe, what could loosely be called the traveller’s tales. The genre was so successful and pervasive, it helped, as Catherine Gallagher argues, give birth to the ‘unique and paradoxical’ discourse of narrative fictionality—when the convincing portrayal of imaginary characters and events slowly tipped from being seen as a type of deception to being embraced as a form of expression. (Gallagher 2006: 337) When Daniel Defoe, for example, published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, he tried to pass it off as a true tale—an account of the ‘Life and strange surprising adventures’ of a real seaman, ‘Written by himself and deliver’d to a Friend’. (Defoe 1719: title page) It was similar in style to any number of stories that appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of

them collected in the works of Purchas and Richard Hakluyt. A year after its publication, in response to 'some Objections' that the 'Story is feign'd, that the Names are borrow'd, and that it is all a Romance', Defoe insisted that, 'though Allegorical' the story was 'historical', because there was a 'Man alive, and well known too, the Actions of whose Life are the just Subject of these Volumes'. That man is usually taken to have been Alexander Selkirk, the Scottish sailor marooned on an island in the South Pacific in 1704. Citing what is arguably the prototype of the modern novel, he compared his story of Crusoe to 'the famous History of Don Quixote...an emblematic History of, and a just Satyr upon the Duke de Medina Sedonia'. (Defoe 1720: A2v-A3)

In *Savage Kingdom*, I decided to reflect the difficulties that surround establishing the historical truth of Smith's story of his encounter with Pocahontas by telling it in a way similar to Defoe, as a story that could be read as 'allegorical' as well as (or, if not) 'historical', that might be 'emblematic' but also a 'Satyr'. Reflecting the literary and rhetorical conventions of the genre, it was given a prolix title 'Captain Smith's Relation of his being Taken Prisoner by the Indians, how they Conjured Him, Powhatan entertained Him, would have slain him, and how his daughter saved his life'. The account that followed, drawing on Smith's own writings and those associated with him, was distinguished typographically as well as linguistically and stylistically from the rest of the text, endnotes indicating divergences from and between the various sources. (Woolley 2008: 121-133)

The switch of discourses in a work billed as a 'true story' provoked some hostile critical scrutiny. J. Frederick Fausz, a professor of ethnohistory, reviewing *Savage Kingdom* for the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, described the title as 'eye-catching but flawed'. It exacerbated what Fausz saw as the book's main problem, which was that, while adding 'important new details about the English side of the Jamestown venture', it betrayed an 'enthusiasm for storytelling' which sometimes led 'into the realm of fantasy', the areytos concerning Indian history being an example, which Fausz characterised as giving 'speaking parts to Powhatan [i.e. Indian] gods'. He saw the way Captain Smith's story about Pocahontas was told as a 'cobbling together' of a 'misleading "Relation" from three different books', which for him 'confirms the traditional story that Pocahontas saved John Smith'. (Fausz 2007: 578)

Similar criticisms were made in a review of the book in the *Washington Post*. While accepting evidence of 'prodigious research', the reviewer felt attempts had been made to 'improve on it [...] by papering over historical questions'. For example, it 'blends Smith's various accounts to give us the legendary tale [of Smith being saved by Pocahontas], as if told by the captain around a campfire. He doesn't disclose this cut-and-paste job, except in an oblique footnote.' (Horwitz 2007)

Such reactions, echoing those directed at Schama in the context of a work of fiction, express the deep cultural anxiety among some historians about experimenting with what might be called a syncretic discourse that mixes fictional techniques with nonfiction. 'We historians are firmly bound by the authority of our sources (and by no other authority, human or divine), nor must we use fiction to fill in the gaps,' pronounced the Tudor historian Geoffrey Elton in a series of lectures given at the University of Michigan in 1990 and published under the title *Return to Essentials*. 'The historian is not allowed to invent convenient detail to make a convincing story.' (Elton 2002: 49, 62)

'Filling in the gaps,' the manifesto of so many historical novelists and anathema to historians such as Elton, is an image that assumes discrete points of certainty in a dark chasm of ignorance; there is no penumbra of doubt, no gradation of certainty. To use a scientific analogy, it assumes historical reality to be a Newtonian system rather than a quantum field. But in the case of writing about communities like the Virginia Indians, who essentially only exist only in the texts of their colonisers, this simply is not the case. There are few if any fixed points from which to triangulate, no objective facts upon which we can rely.

Elton is also assuming that fiction is only about invention, but clearly, as it has evolved over the centuries since the time of Captain John Smith and Daniel Defoe, there is more to it than that. There are techniques and effects—narrative, rhetorical, metaphorical, structural, philological, psychological—which the fiction writer has found useful to creating meaning and expose truths using material that is found as well as invented. What I was trying to do in *Savage Kingdom* was to use some of these to explore historical knowledge, in a possibly futile effort to discover the promised 'true story' so rashly included in the book's subtitle.

Here, I believe, is where the tension between history and fiction lies—the ‘true story’. ‘Telling stories’ is, after all, the accusation adults make against children who tell lies.

§

In 1993, Luise White and Barbara Hanawalt, respectively an African and medieval historian, reviewed Schama’s *Dead Certainties* for the *American Historical Review*. The article took an unorthodox approach, the two deciding upon a ‘dialogue’. Referring to themselves in the third person, they did this as ‘they have both experimented with ways of presenting unusual evidence and agonized about whether or not the stories they tell represent historical realities’. (Hanawalt and White 1993)

Hanawalt had that year published a work entitled *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* which used stories ‘to give life to disparate archival gleanings’. These stories were based on ‘real people who appeared in the records, but [...] were fleshed out with other evidence, creating a composite of experience’. In a series of articles, White had used oral testimony to explore so-called vampire stories in colonial and modern Africa, which appeared together in her 2000 book *Speaking with Vampires*. Both Hanawalt and White were ‘keenly interested’ from a historian’s point of view ‘in how to tell a story’ while remaining sensitive ‘to the problems of writing histories into which one places dialogues, motives, and premeditated actions’.

These are the questions they posed themselves:

How much leeway does the historian have in filling in the missing evidence to tell a coherent story? What are the risks of allowing the historian’s voice to intrude even more in the interpretation, if part of the story is made up? Because so much of writing history is interpretation in any case, Hanawalt and White believe that historians should boldly move beyond current conventions of historical expository writing and explore all avenues for presenting the story. (Hanawalt and White 1993: 121)

Speaking with Vampires is an example of such boldness, focussing less on how historians themselves construct stories than how they should deal with the stories they encounter in the oral and written historical record. The book begins by relating what came to be known as the ‘Mombasa incident’ of 1947. That year, rumours spread through the Kenyan city that the fire brigade had abducted a sleeping woman with the intention of taking her blood. A letter from a local colonial commissioner back to

England described this 'yarn', as he called it, and how it had run 'round rapidly and aroused a great deal of excitement', culminating in a riot that police only managed to quell once reinforcements had been brought in. (White 2000: 3)

This was one of a number of such 'yarns' Luise White uncovered while working in Nairobi in the mid-1970s, in Siaya District in western Kenya in 1986, and in and around Kampala in 1990. She dubbed them 'vampire' stories, as they all involved an element of bloodsucking by an alien figure, usually a representative or agent of the authorities in colonial Africa, including the police and game rangers as well as members of the fire brigade.

'What are historians to do with such evidence?' White asked.

To European officials, these stories were proof of African superstition, and of the disorder that superstition so often caused. It was yet another groundless African belief, the details of which were not worth the recall of officials and observers. But to young Africans growing up in Kenya—or Tanganyika or Northern Rhodesia—in the 1930s, such practices were terrible but matter-of-fact events. (4)

The conventional historical response would be to try and find out about the 'truth' behind such stories, to treat them forensically, interrogating them for inconsistencies, triangulating them using other evidence (preferably not in the form of other stories) for corroboration. White's approach was radically different—she went as far as to describe it as a form of historical 'apostasy'. (113) 'What better way to reexamine the way historians have thought about evidence, reliability, and truth than by studying the history of things that never happened?' as she put it. (4)

This does not mean, as a historian, adopting a position of non-judgemental liberal detachment that equivocates about truth. She knew that the firemen of Mombasa were not abducting women to siphon off their blood. She acknowledged the 'confusions and misunderstanding' underlying these stories—confusions that, of course, go both ways, with white colonisers in 20th-century Africa (just as in seventeenth-century Virginia) misinterpreting certain rites performed by the native populations as evidence of cannibalism. But such confusions and misunderstanding tell us something, White contends. Those 'of the best kind [...] reveal the world of power and uncertainty' the story-tellers are concerned about. 'Their very falseness is what

gives them meaning; they are a way of talking that encourages a reassessment of everyday experience to address the workings of power and knowledge and how regimes use them.’ (41-3)

For the historian, White argues, discovering the meaning of such stories should come from observing their generic features, and then identifying what separates them in each telling. It is these differences, these details, which tend to give the stories their authority. She cites the example of Zebede Oyoyo, who reported escaping a vampire attack by the Nairobi fire brigade in the 1920s. He told a version that was well known among his neighbours, which was how it came to White’s attention. When she interviewed him, the story began to shift. During the first interview, the emphasis was on his bold efforts to resist his abductors—‘My fists were like sledgehammers’, ‘When I saw the chance, I dashed out of the room [...]. I outpaced them’. In a second encounter, Oyoyo provided more detail, about being seized in a urinal, about being taken to a ‘certain room’, about his efforts to escape. (38) It was these details that, much like the heart-shaped purses carried by Fugger’s bankers mentioned in Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, made the story particular and therefore more meaningful.

Barbara Hanawalt’s use of story-telling in medieval history was, perhaps, of a more conventional sort, but no less challenging to a realistic or positivistic approach to history. The thesis of her book *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* was conventionally historical, to show that ‘the Middle Ages did recognize stages of life that corresponded to childhood and adolescence’. She wanted to challenge the ‘inherent “Whigism”’ that lay behind the assumption ‘widespread [...] among professional historians, as well as among the general public’ that the concept of childhood was essentially modern, a view promulgated in the French historian Philippe Ariès’s influential 1960 work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, translated into English in 1962 under the title *Centuries of Childhood*. (Hanawalt 1993: 5-7)

In her joint review with White of Schama’s *Dead Certainties*, Hanawalt argued that ‘the scholastic tradition of sticking closely to the sources and meticulously interpreting them puts limits on imagining contexts for the sources’. (Hanawalt and White 1993: 123) She attempted to overcome this in *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* by including

short stories to illustrate or dramatize some feature of medieval childhood. Some of these stories were based on contemporary sources. For example:

In a story worthy of Chaucer's miller, Richard, son of John le Mareschall of Smithfield, was charged with abducting the wife of Stephen of Hereford. The neighbors were full of gossip about it. Richard had been seeing this woman for some time. When Stephen was away at Winchester Fair, Richard was at his house all the time, and the neighbors and friends of Stephen determined to put a halt to it. They searched the house for Richard, but could not find him. Finally, they directed the adulterous wife to open a chest closed with iron, and therein they found Richard. (123)

Hanawalt had found this story in court records, and few historians are likely to balk at its use. Such stories are particular and specific, so their representative value may be questionable, but they are often vivid and, within the context of a publicly-witnessed court process, usually considered to be reliable, and often authenticated by the sort of unexpected detail that White has shown can give a generic story convincing specificity—in this case, the discovery of the adulterous Richard in a 'chest closed with iron'.

But Hanawalt also used a different kind of story in her book. One, which introduces the work, has a priest telling a group of children gathered at a house in London's Cheapside a series of tales about various moral hazards they will face as they grow up. The tales themselves are drawn from contemporary sources (in particular, accounts of pageants that had taken place in the capital during the reign of Richard II), but the priest and the scenario binding the stories together together are fictional. (3-4, 228)

Elsewhere in the book, she developed some of these stories to explore particular issues and support her overall thesis that there was an awareness in the Middle Ages of childhood being a distinct stage in life. For example, the historical story of a child's mother being run over and killed by an earl's squire, and efforts by locals to apprehend the perpetrator and care for the orphan, becomes a tale demonstrating the communal histories that bound medieval children to their parish. (62-3)

Judged as fictions, Hanawalt's efforts are not always successful—some of her characters come over as caricatures, and the dialogue tends to be stilted or sham. But, even if they were more convincingly written, the question would remain: are they historical?

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In a preface to the book, Hanawalt argued that her fictions served to 'redress an imbalance in the records':

We always know more about the elite and about middle-class males because they leave records, are involved in disputes, run government and the economy, and so on. We often know only bits and pieces about the poor and the woman and children. The composite stories help to bring a completeness to sparse and scattered narratives that would otherwise be missing. (ix)

In other words, following the same logic as de Groot applied to historical fiction, storytelling can help historians fill 'the gaps of history'. History is about the passage of time, and the often tattered fragments of it that survive in the record tell you not only about those moments, but is suggestive of the moments that led up to them, and those that followed, all of which can be woven together with narrative acting as the thread.

§

The novelists Norman Mailer took a very dim view of historians. 'When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history,' he told one interviewer, 'they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know it's fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer.' (Lennon 2006)

The issue arose because, though he made his name as a writer of fiction with his 1948 work *The Naked and the Dead*, from 1968 to 1983, one of the most productive periods of his career, he did not produce a single novel. His two masterpieces from that period were non-fiction: his account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and his monumental study of the murderer Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song* (1979). The first he subtitled 'History as a Novel, The Novel as History', the second, at least in early editions, he dubbed a 'true life novel'.

In his characteristically forthright way, he was contemptuous of efforts to distinguish fact from fiction. 'It's a dumb debate,' he asserted. He pointed out how in the 1975 novel *Ragtime*, E. L. Doctorow engineered an encounter between Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan which had resulted in what Mailer considered 'one of the best chapters in American literature' which told him 'an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about

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Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it even more delicious' (indeed, when Doctorow was himself asked if two other historical characters in the novel had actually met, his reply was 'They have now' (quoted in Gordon S Wood 1991)). (Lennon 2006: 96)

So what use, for the novelist, is history (or other forms of nonfiction, such as journalism), if not to provide '10,000 facts'? Ironically, for Mailer, it was not facts at all but the very thing of which some historians are so nervous: story. Writing nonfiction was 'vastly easier than trying to write novels', he told one interviewer, because 'I always had a terrible time with the story' and that is what nonfiction provided. (94)

The book that inspired *The Executioner's Song*, written by a man Mailer described as 'tart as a grand aunt, but a ballsy little guy, and [...] the most perfect writer of my generation,' was Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* published in 1966, about the murder of a wealthy farming family in Kansas. (Clarke 1988: 314-5) Capote chose to call it not a 'true-life novel', with that whiff of journalistic sensationalism, but a 'nonfiction novel', an oxymoron, as most characterise it, that the critic Alfred Kazin insightfully suggested he chose not to emphasise the nonfiction, but because he was desperate 'to keep his novelist's prestige'. (Kazin 2009: 23)

As in *The Executioner's Song*, the nonfiction status of *In Cold Blood* was never in doubt. It was based on a series of articles written by Capote for *The New Yorker*, which identified the actual people and places involved—the victims, their friends and neighbours, the investigating detectives, the two perpetrators, the remote Kansas village of Holcomb where the crime was committed, the graveyard where the victims were buried, the local police station, the gaols, the courts and the place of execution.

Capote had been inspired to write the articles when he saw an article about the murder of the Clutter family in the *New York Times*, and persuaded the editor of *The New Yorker* to send him to Holcomb to write about it. With Harper Lee acting as his 'assistant researchist', he got to know the locals, including the Alvin Dewey of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, whose investigations led to the arrest of the murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. (Plimpton 1966) As well as securing Dewey's cooperation, he became a confidant of the murderers following their arrest, becoming particularly fascinated by the crippled autodidact drifter Smith.

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Kazin called the result 'meticulously factual', pointing out that Capote had accumulated six thousand pages of notes. Capote insisted on the point in an interview in the *New York Times* he gave to the editor of the *Paris Review*, George Plimpton. Plimpton cited an incident in the book when the renegade Smith and Hickock see a dog trotting along the side of the road, and Hickock swerves the car to run it over. (Capote 2000: 108) A reference to the dog in an earlier section relating to Smith and Hickock suggested to Plimpton that Capote had used the unfortunate creature as a narrative device, to link the two sections. 'Was there actually a dog at that exact point in the narrative?' he asked. Capote was insistent: 'There was a dog, and it was precisely as described. One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions.' (Plimpton 1966)

This accuracy was maintained even though he did not use a tape recorder or notebook for his interviews, having trained himself, he told Plimpton, to 'transcribe conversation...within 95 per cent of absolute accuracy'. (41-2, 38) (In another *New York Times* article the level of accuracy was put at 92 per cent, and he told *Newsweek* that the technique was at best 90 per cent effective 'and who cares about the other ten per cent?' (De Bellis 1979))

So how accurate was he, assuming accuracy to be a metric to assess the work? In a 1966 article for *Esquire* magazine, Phillip K. Tompkins examined Capote's portrayal of Perry Smith. Seeking corroboration of some of the key scenes featuring Smith, he contacted Josephine Meiers, the wife of the undersheriff at the county court gaol where Smith was held following his arrest. In a touching scene that demonstrated the attachment between Mrs Meiers and Smith, which in turn was suggestive of an apparently brutal murderer's inner humanity, Capote related her account of washing dishes in the kitchen of the sheriff's residence, tormented by the sound of the previously taciturn prisoner breaking down:

I turned on the radio. Not to hear him. But I could. Crying like a child. He'd never broke down before, shown any signs of it. Well, I went to him. The door of his cell. He reached out his hand. He wanted me to hold his hand, and I did. I held his hand and all he said was 'I'm embraced by shame.' (Capote 2000: 300)

Tompkins claimed to have contacted Mrs Meier by phone, and she had told him 'repeatedly and firmly, in her gentle way, that these things were not true'—she had

not been in the kitchen that day, nor had she turned up the radio to drown out Perry's cries. (Tompkins 1968: 53)*

Perhaps the most damning evidence of Capote's use of fabrication was revealed by his biographer Gerald Clarke. The book ends touchingly with a chance encounter between Detective Dewey and Susan Kidwell, a friend of the Clutter family, at the cemetery where the victims had been buried. According to Clarke, no such meeting took place. (Clarke 1988: 359)

One of Tompkins's complaints was that Capote's book was inadequately scrutinised because it was reviewed by literary critics rather than journalists or historians. While some, in part provoked by Capote's boasting, considered his claims to such high fidelity to the facts as examples of 'puffery', most took the work's accuracy as read, being dazzled by its aesthetic rather than journalistic or historical qualities, one declaring it 'a work of art, the work of an artist'. (Voss 2011: 61)

Sympathetic critics also noted that both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* were 'objective'. This is what also made the works distinct from the 'New Journalism' that emerged at around the same time, as produced by the likes of Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and, indeed, Capote and Mailer. Capote featured heavily in *The Muses are Heard*, his 1956 first-person report for the *New Yorker* on a US production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* which toured in the Soviet Union. And though referring to himself in the third person, Mailer was all over *The Armies of the Night*—he literally spelled out his name in capital letters, following his arrest for taking part in protests against the Vietnam War. (See Bloom 2009: 180, Mailer 1968: 180)

In Cold Blood, in contrast, was, Plimpton declared, 'remarkable for its objectivity'. He did not mean because of its journalistic integrity, but because 'nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude'. (Plimpton 1966). In his review of the book for the *New York Times*, Conrad Knickerbocker noted that 'not the least of the book's

* Ralph Voss has questioned the validity of Tompkins's accusation, having found mention of the incident in Capote's field notes preserved in the New York Public Library. However, Voss is curiously coy about what the notes record, leaving the issue unresolved. (Voss 2011: 86)

merits is that it manages a major moral judgment without the author's appearance once on stage'. (*New York Times Book Review*, 16 January, 1966: 37)

The authorial absence is even more notable in the case of Mailer, a forceful presence in works such as *White Negro*, as well as in American intellectual and political life in general. In *The Executioner's Song* he apparently achieved 'something like an...annulment of self, an "extinction of personality," in which he suppressed his own voice to become the medium for a variety of others'. (Edmundson 1990: 435) This absence, as one critic put it, 'dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner'. (Richard Stern quoted in Merrill 1992: 130)

The novelist Dave Eggers went further. In his introduction to a 2012 edition of *The Executioner's Song*, he declared it a masterpiece not because it was derived from an archive of material 'yet to be matched in the history of American journalism', but because it bore 'no markings of what we presume to be Mailer's prose style or point of view. Mailer once said that the book was given to him, whole and complete, from God, and it's difficult to argue with that'. (Mailer 2012: Foreword)

Whether or not the author's absence makes the work 'objective', perhaps one of the defining qualities of works of nonfiction such as history, is a moot point. Both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* are clearly authored and structurally and stylistically adventurous. *In Cold Blood*, for example, uses an intricately and brilliantly wrought interweaving of recollection and reportage, several timelines running in parallel to reveal the lives of the victims alongside those of the perpetrators, the unfolding of the crime alongside the ongoing investigations and the subsequent trial and execution. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's usually booming voice is muted by a highly effective form of ventriloquism, his use of free indirect discourse allowing the major characters apparently to tell their own stories in their own voices. This is evident when the protagonist Gilmore is first introduced with his cousin Brenda: 'Gary was kind of quiet. There was one reason they got along. Brenda was always gabbing and he was a good listener.' (Mailer 1998: 5; for other examples see Arlett 1987: 223, Nuttall 2009: 184)

The result of this combination of art and 'objectivity', according to some champions of the genre, is a unique form of realism, one that history alone, with its 10,000 facts, cannot achieve: fictional techniques, if not fiction, combining with fact to deliver not

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moral platitudes or easy answers, but, as Eggers put it, ‘raw, exasperating reality’. (Mailer 2012, Foreword) Similarly, Knickerbocker declared in his *New York Times* review that Capote’s aim ‘to declare a reality that transcended reality’ had succeeded in producing ‘a total evocation of reality’. (*New York Times Book Review*, 16 January, 1966: 1, 37) Reality, in other words, was what such books provided—not physical reality, or historical reality, but the reality that transcends reality, revealed through narrative art.

Fiction and History

‘The certainty of direct reference of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone,’ wrote Linda Hutcheon (1989: 3). She identified a cultural response to this loss of a ‘direct’ historical referent, which she awkwardly dubbed ‘historiographic metafiction’, claiming it to be a kind of paradigm of postmodern literature. This genre ‘challenges...any naive realist concept of representation’ but also any ‘naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world’. (6) The examples she cited include *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Ragtime*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *The Name of the Rose*. (3)

Hutcheon did not come up with her category just for critical convenience. She argued that it tells us something about the relationship of history to fiction. Works like *The Name of the Rose*, through parody and self-reflexivity, show ‘there is no one writable “truth” about history and experience, only a series of versions’ (8) and by exposing this ‘loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing’, we are able to take a ‘step toward intellectual self-awareness’. (10)

The sign of a work of historiographic metafiction, in her view, is its ‘interdiscursivity’, the ‘collective modes of discourse from which the postmodern parodically draws’. (12) A recent and revealing example might be Laurent Binet’s *HHhH* (2012). It is a book about an historic event: ‘Operation Anthropoid’, an attempt made by two Czech parachutists in Prague, 1942 to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Nazi secret services and ‘the most dangerous man in the Third Reich’. He was an influential and ambitious member of the Nazi elite, a quip popular among his SS colleagues giving the book its distinctive title: ‘*Himmlers Hirn heisst Heydrich*’ (Himmler’s brain is called Heydrich). In a peritext, the author declares that ‘all the characters in *HHhH* are real. All the events depicted are true.’ (Binet 2012: About the Book) Yet he describes himself as a novelist, and the French prizes that gave the work its literary prestige, including the Prix Goncourt, categorised it as a novel. Also, writers who garlanded it in accolades were not distinguished historians of the Second World War, but novelists such as Martin Amis, Mario Vargas Llosa and Bret Easton Ellis. (*The Observer*, 29 April, 2012, p42)

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So which is it, a work of history or fiction? Both—an epitome of interdiscursivity. Binet uses fictional techniques, such as characterisation and dialogue, but they are interspersed with passages and whole sections written as conventional narrative history. The other discourse at work is that of the memoirist. A commentary runs through the text, in which Binet recounts his struggles to come to terms with his project, what it is about, and most of all the ‘temptation to make things up’. The first part of the book begins with an epigram, quoting Osip Mandelstam: ‘Once again, the writer stains the tree of History with his thoughts.’ And, right from the start, the narrator (let us call him Binet) acknowledges that he is leaving stains on every tree that lines the narrative path. In the first chapter, he introduces the reader to Jozef Gabčík, lying on a ‘little iron bed’ in a darkened apartment. Binet attempts to objectify Gabčík, to make clear that he ‘existed, and it was to this name that he answered’, that he is part of a story that is ‘as true as it is extraordinary’, that he is the man who, with his colleagues, took part in what Binet considers ‘one of the greatest acts of resistance in human history, and without doubt the greatest of the Second World War’. But by manufacturing this image of him lying on a bed in a darkened room, of him listening to the creaking of the trams passing his shuttered window, ‘I am reducing this man to the ranks of a vulgar character and his actions to literature: an ignominious transformation.’ (Binet 2012: 3)

The book continues in this tone, Binet striving to reconcile his fictionalising urges with his historicising ones: ‘I’m not sure yet if I’m going to “visualize” (that is, invent!) this meeting or not. If I do, it will be the clinching proof that fiction does not respect anything’; ‘I had this vision of Himmler red-faced and with a blocked nose (perhaps because I’ve had a nasty cold myself for the past four days) and my tyrannic imagination wouldn’t budge from this idea’. (106, 128) He agonises over whether he should invent a character, which his brother-in-law (‘with whom I’ve discussed all this’) describes as being like ‘planting false proof at a crime scene where the floor is already strewn with incriminating evidence’. (227) He thinks he is corrupted by literature, that to be a novelist is to be a trickster; he finds ‘cheap literary effects’ irresistible. (242, 187, 254).

He is also corrupted, or troubled, by the history. He regularly reminds the reader of the struggles of research, of how patchy and ambiguous the historical record can be. At one point, he is wondering if he should 'be like Victor Hugo' and indulge in a lengthy digression on the town of Halle, where Heydrich was born in 1904. He imagines walking around, describing the streets, the food, the people... But he demurs, because 'there are two towns in Germany called Halle, and I don't even know which one I'm talking about'. (19)

Beneath the anxiety and squeamishness, the charming modesty and impish jealousy (which give the book a parodic quality that contrasts with the grim nature of the historical subject matter) lies the realisation that the work's interdiscursivity, its mixing of fact and imagination, results in an unstable compound, like one of those elements that exist on the periodic table and in the laboratory, but not in nature:

I [...] read lots of historical novels, to see how others deal with the genre's constraints. Some are keen to demonstrate their extreme accuracy, others don't bother, and a few manage skilfully to skirt around the historical truth without inventing too much. I am struck all the same by the fact that, in every case, fiction wins out over history. (17)

That is what happened with *The Angel of Ferrara*. Fiction won out—or, I felt, should have done, which, as a writer of nonfiction, I found disconcerting. When dealing with a historical character such as Tarquinia Molza, a novelist might with the best will in the world try to preserve her historical integrity, to keep the facts of her biography pristine, but the fiction starts to interact with the fact, to change it. One cannot demarcate the one from the other, as the writer and still less as the reader; the discourses intermingle and what they become is not something else, some hybrid of fact and fiction that constitutes a third epistemological state—they become fiction. Binet's qualms reflected this; they exposed an unease that bolder novelists, the Pynchons and the Doctorows, have the confidence to ignore or obliterate. That is perhaps what makes them heroic, but which, to those who have a more ambivalent view of literature's moral and philosophical objectives and achievements, could make their works specious.

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The historian Hayden White has worked harder than most to introduce postmodernism to historiography, and to explore the foggy boundary between history and fiction in which historiographic metafiction like *HHhH* lose themselves. During the 1960s, boundary disputes between the 'pure' sciences and the humanities triggered by the emergence of the social sciences drew White into questioning the disciplinary identity of his profession. Into which category should history fall? In a 1966 paper, he noted that historians had tried to deal with this question by adopting what he called a 'Fabian' tactic of occupying the 'epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science'. But White doubted it was possible to occupy such a middle ground, because it implied a polarity that does not exist. The two-cultures divide, to use C. P. Snow's characterisation of the division between science and the arts, was an illusion fostered by 'the romantic artist's fear of science and the positivistic scientist's ignorance of art'. White noted that the 'discovery', which he then attributed primarily to advances in psychology, of the 'common constructivist character of both artistic and scientific statements' had dissolved the distinction. Modern criticism, he claimed, 'has achieved a clearer understanding of the operations by which the artist expresses his vision of the world and the scientist frames his hypotheses about it', and provided a common approach to studying both. (White 1966: 111-2)

His magnum opus, *Metahistory*, published in 1973, tried to demonstrate this thesis by using a 'constructivist' approach in an analysis of the great masterpieces of nineteenth-century historical writing. The construct he used was the trope, developing an elaborate 'tropological' system to explore what these writers produced not in terms of its authenticity and plausibility as an account of the past, but the rhetorical methods used. As one admirer put it, by treating the 'great texts of nineteenth-century historians as if they were novels—something no theorist had ever done before', White had produced 'a new and exciting form of historiography that was unlike anything that had previously be done in the field'. (Ankersmit 1994: 7-8)

Over the following years, White's thinking evolved somewhat erratically in papers scattered around a variety of academic journals and essay collections (see Kansteiner 1993), but he ended up declaring himself a resolute postmodernist, adopting it not just

as a theory, but as an ideology with profound implications for the role and meaning of history:

What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity—a historiography which, in cutting itself off from the resources of poïesis (invention) and artistic writing, also severed its ties to what was most creative in the real sciences it sought half-heartedly to emulate. (White 2005: 156)

Novelists, White argued, had become the true historians, by exploring and exposing the essential fictionality of historical discourse through ‘the tendency to bring language into question, to indict its claims to transparency and univocity of meaning’. (White 2010: 189)

Inevitably, such ideas appalled many historians. In *Return to Essentials*, his rousing defence of ‘professional historiography’, Geoffrey Elton condemned White for reducing history to rhetoric, of conflating history with the philosophy of history, of producing ‘altogether meaningless verbiage, testifying only to a general lack of experience in trying actually to write serious history, and more especially history beyond the narrow confines of the history of ideas’. (Elton 2002: 34) In a review of Elton’s book, Laurence Stone was equally scornful. ‘We should fight to preserve from the attacks by extreme relativists, from Hayden White to Derrida, the hard-won professional expertise in the study of evidence that was worked out in the late nineteenth century.’ (‘Dry Heat, Cool Reason’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 Jan, 1992)

So who is right? Is a historical novel like *The Angel of Ferrara* epistemologically equivalent to a work of history such as *Savage Kingdom*, a fictional story essentially the same as a ‘true’ one? As has been shown in previous chapters, both rely on research and narrative, both engage in fictions and deal with facts. So what separates them?

Most criticism, particularly of the sort associated with a postmodern position, considers such issues from the perspective of the reader—indeed, as Barthes has told us, the author is dead. But how does a writer see it? If you write both types of book,

use both discourses, is the difference one of degree or taste or emphasis, or one of kind?

§

In 2011, the Institute of Historical Research ran a symposium on the relationship of history to historical fiction entitled 'Novel Approaches'. Its opening session was a discussion between the Tudor historian David Loades and Hilary Mantel. Loades confessed that he did not read much historical fiction, but was clear on what distinguished his profession from Mantel's:

The difference between the historian and the writer of historical fiction is one of priorities. The former accepts a responsibility to be true to the record, where the latter is primarily an entertainer who happens to use a historical period as the context of his story. [21:20]*

In other words, similar materials may be involved, but the results are of a very different nature (and, he implied, significance).

Mantel was too polite to challenge Loades's dismissive and perhaps patronising view of fiction, but she did seem to agree that the two enterprises were somewhat, perhaps even fundamentally distinct. 'Historians rely on hindsight, it's their tool,' she said. 'Empathy is the equivalent for historical novelists.' [36:10]

While she acknowledged the existence of 'facts', and believed that showing them due respect was important to the historical novelist's work, she felt that they were transformed when they come in contact with fiction. Journalists, she noted, were always asking her "'How much of this is fact?', as if there were two neat categories':

But if I were to try and disentangle fact from fiction, for example in *Wolf Hall*, I would have to footnote every line [...]. And even if I did footnote every line I couldn't pinpoint, I couldn't pin it down for you the sort of alchemical process by which fact metamorphoses into fiction. [34:52]

* The citations in [square brackets] indicate the approximate starting positions in minutes and seconds of the video recording of the session posted by the IHR on its website at <http://www.history.ac.uk/podcasts/novel-approaches-academic-history-historical-fiction/hilary-mantel-and-david-loades>.

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Having written both works of history and now, with *The Angel of Ferrara*, historical fiction, I would agree with her that some transformative process occurs, and it is one that derives from a fundamental difference underlying the two discourses.

One obvious difference lies in her reference to the absence of footnotes. Citations are a rarity in historical novels, or novels of any sort, for the reasons Mantel gave. David Foster Wallace famously used footnotes in his masterwork *Infinite Jest*, but as a stylistic device to reflect the non-linear, disorderly nature of ‘thought patterns and fact patterns’, as he put it, rather than as a way of validating the information the work contains. (Burn 2012: 86) The pseudo-fictional elements of *Savage Kingdom* were fully footnoted, in an effort to identify the sources they drew upon and how these sources were used. But there are no footnotes in *The Angel of Ferrara*, and, like Mantel, I cannot imagine how they could be included. The reasons for this are practical as much as ‘alchemical’. A fiction requires frequent reworking, and with each redraft the fictional events or characters can and often do creep away from their historical counterparts. As a metafictional experiment, using some elaborate citational scheme to note the interactions of the history and fiction might prove to be interesting, but the result would not be a conventional novel, or even a novel.

That is not to say that facts do not matter in fiction. One can imagine the credibility of a work of historical fiction being damaged if information assumed to be factual was shown to be inaccurate—but that, I would argue, is because such inaccuracies act as artefacts (in the scientific sense), like typographical errors or narrative inconsistencies, distracting the reader’s efforts to suspend disbelief. They do not ultimately determine the quality or validity of the fiction.

In the case of *The Angel of Ferrara*, I have shown how history inspired the idea of a story about castrati. But major elements of the story, such as the ‘manufactory of eunuchs’, were imaginary. Such a ‘manufactory’ could have existed in Italy at around the period in which the book is set, and its morally and theologically dubious status would make it all the more likely to escape notice. However, I would not judge the success of the novel as a piece of writing on the basis of whether or not such a manufactory really existed. If evidence of one turned up in the records, I would not count it as vindication or validation of the work.

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In contrast, if a new account surfaced of how, say, the Virginia Indians practiced their religion or described their origins, or it turned out that a third-party report existed of Captain John Smith's encounter with Pocahontas, I would see that as having an important impact on *Savage Kingdom*, not just on the content but the manner in which the 'true story' should be told.

What, then, produces this difference? If a historical work can use fictional techniques and fiction can use historical research, why make the discrimination?

Here is a tentative proposal, ironically inspired by the historian who suggested that effectively no such discrimination could be made. In a paper on historical fiction, Hayden White considered the work of the French essayist Michel de Certeau, which he expressed thus:

Historical discourse wagers everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable. A simply true account of the world based on [...] the documentary record [...] can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what 'reality' consists of. However, the rest of the real, after we have said what we can assert to be true about it, would not be everything and anything we could imagine about it. The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be. (White 2005: 147)

Here, White, or rather de Certeau, is using a conception of reality that is well established in the scientific realm. My first book, *Virtual Worlds* (1992) was about 'virtual reality' (VR). Though notionally about a technology that was then (and at this writing remains) nowhere near delivering what it promises, the book was a wider survey of the notion of reality in the age of simulation. One of the claims I explored was that, in an infinite universe, the real must include not only what is actual or observable, but what the laws of mathematics and physics determined to be possible (or virtual).

James Wood described Mantel's work as having a 'cunning universalism'. The adjective suggests that he thinks there is something bogus about it, but I would argue that, like all effective historical fiction, it has a universalism that comes from giving the reader glimpses of reality—not natural, physical reality, the realm of science, but cultural, social, one might even say human reality. History can tell us what may or may not be

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true about this reality, but fiction shows us what is real. Historical novels are, in that sense, like experiments or simulations, testing out hypothetical possibilities (which may include variations or even contradictions of the known facts) to establish what lies in the domain of the real.

This is not to say that novels, to be properly fictional, must conform to the conventions of literary realism or naturalism. Writing in *The New York Times*, Salman Rushdie pointed out that the 'magic realism' associated with the works of Gabriel García Márquez (as well as his own) is not just about the magic:

If magic realism were just magic, it wouldn't matter. It would be mere whimsy—writing in which, because anything can happen, nothing has effect. It's because the magic in magic realism has deep roots in the real, because it grows out of the real and illuminates it in beautiful and unexpected ways, that it works. (Rushdie 2014)

J. G. Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash* is a determinedly postmodern work (the subject of a 1976 essay by Baudrillard, no less (Baudrillard and Evans 1991)), yet its author wrote this in an introductory note, using a wide definition of fiction to reach a similar conclusion about reality:

I feel the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is not less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

Echoing de Certeau's theory, Ballard believed that the role of the novelist had come close to 'that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory faced with an unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.' (Ballard 2014: Introduction)

I think this approach could also help sort out the status of works that appear to hover on the borderline between history (or journalism) and fiction, in particular nonfiction novels such as *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* that apparently challenged the border's existence. Their value lies not in their conformity to truth which, as we have seen, is sometimes dubious, but in their ability to expose 'raw, exasperating reality' or a 'total evocation of reality'. George Eliot hinted at such a view when she described, in

the Proem to *Romola*, the angel of the dawn beholding Florence 'as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ them, as the great mechanical principles on which those domes and towers were raised must make a likeness in human building that will be broader and deeper than all possible change'. (Eliot 1993: 3-4) Thus the human continuities are raised almost to the realm of physical laws. Or as Auden put it, writing of his own poetical art: 'all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities.' (Auden 1962: 28)

Of course, whether or not a particular work of fiction, regardless of truth, comes close to any sort of reality is moot. Historians can argue for the validity of their work. It is a much tougher job for novelists. There is no equivalent to the mathematical modelling or simulation used in the physical sciences (and, arguably, nor should there be, as it is a human not mechanical reality that is being explored). The success of fiction remains a matter of aesthetic instinct, judgment and experience, decided by critical connoisseurship or posterity.

This is what makes it so difficult for someone who has written history to write fiction, and is perhaps the reason why so few historians have successfully made the transition. If you know how hard-won historical facts and hypotheses can be, if you have experienced the slog of working through hand lists and archives, of deciphering crossed-letter writing or minuscule or Elizabethan secretary hand, the idea of making it all 'cease to be true or false' with a flick of the pen or a tap of the keyboard can seem careless and arbitrary. The desire to exhibit the research is hard to resist, and the reluctance to manipulate the facts to see where they will take you hard to overcome. While writing *The Angel of Ferrara*, I often found myself unsure how and to what extent I should exercise my artistic licence and when I should use my historical discretion. I found I was sometimes reckless when I should have been restrained, at other times timid when I should have been bold. But I did learn that, despite superficial similarities, whatever I was writing was fundamentally different from what I had written before, requiring different skills, aiming at different objectives.

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